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I THOUGHT YOU WERE SOMEONE ELSE

by

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B.A. Rollins College, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Adviser: Lisa Roney

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ABSTRACT

I Thought You Were Someone Else deals with violence, family, love, art, and gender. The author examines these issues as well as what makes a creative work fiction or nonfiction by creating a multi-genre collection of seven short fiction stories and five short nonfiction pieces. Fictional stories feature protagonists similar to the author and protagonists who could be considered completely different from the author. Nevertheless, the protagonists in these pieces, whether they are real or fictitious, all experience grand realizations concerning their identity and surroundings. Essentially, they realize they are not who they thought they were. A young boy realizes he likes destruction; another comes to terms with love and romance. A father deals with his homophobia, while another older man examines his life of violence. Young women cope with getting older and struggling to create families. Others realize that their needs will never be met. All stories deal with growth, change, and discovery, thereby allowing the author to unearth details about identity and how it is shaped and evolves.

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SNAKE HUNTING

The road stretched, a canvas opening to a landscape of native Central Florida pine trees and saw palmettos. I sat in the passenger seat of my parents' white mini van, next to Dad. My brother Michael sat on his knees in the back between the front two seats. He was much taller and almost four years older than me, so he didn't need the height of a regular seat to be able to see the back country—a paved road winding into the wilderness, surrounded by deep green and brown brush. We rode with the windows down, the wind from the van's movement blowing my long, brown hair up into the air. The heat was thick and comforting. Mom sat in the back with Michael. The cicadas sang their loud dusk songs, echoing off the pine trees. Dad turned off onto a side road of sandy dirt. No one was around except for the wilderness and the four of us.

The van pushed forward, barely making any sound, because we were only going five miles per hour. Dad hunched over the steering wheel, squinting his eyes beneath his rectangular glasses as if he were in pain. His face was scrunched up, calculating, surveying, observing. I tried to imitate him, but at nine years old and sixty pounds, I could barely see over the dashboard, so I crouched on the passenger seat, folding my legs beneath me. The road stretched and curved, its ridges and bumps in tune with the cicadas.

A black ribbon squirmed in the sand.

"What's that?" I said and pointed.

Dad stopped the car and put it into park. He grabbed a white pillowcase from the space between us and got out of the van. Michael and I jumped out, too. Mom lagged behind, scared that the snake was venomous. I led Dad and Michael to the spot of the road where I'd seen the

black snake.

“Where?” Dad asked.

The snake was gone, but the picture of its satin black, ess-curved shape lingered in my mind.

“I thought he was right here,” I said, nervous that Dad would think I was just a kid and didn’t know anything about spotting snakes, although I had been practicing with him for a few years.

“He’s there,” Michael said and moved forward. Dad followed, I followed, Mom followed.

Its body covered in the weeds and sand, a shiny black snake head peered up at me, its tongue flicking inside and out, testing the air. I knew the snake was a racer, just a black racer, a typical Florida snake, but I was still excited to see it. My heart pounded faster as Dad, Michael, Mom, and I edged toward the snake, surrounding it. The area was mostly deserted, with only a few houses sprawled out between acres and acres. I wondered if this was the first time the snake had ever seen a human being.

Dad bent down, the white pillowcase clutched in his hand, and the racer darted off, a ripple of black water weaving in and out of the grass. The snake disappeared into the woods, away from the roads, away from the houses, away from us. Dad turned to go back to the van. His moustache, not yet grey, looked like a frown, but he wasn’t unhappy. Snake hunting was his favorite sport. It was Michael’s favorite sport and mine, too.

We didn’t hunt snakes to kill them. We hunted them for pets and for fun. For education. Dad introduced us to the hunt. He always kept strange animals when he was a kid. He once

owned a crow, one a friend of his found in the wild. Joe the crow. Dad took care of Joe because Joe had a neurological disorder; he would faint and fall, blacking out for minutes at a time. Dad loved him like a regular pet. And the crow grew to love my father, too, and his mother, a woman who died way before I was born. Joe also liked to gather all the bright-colored toys in the neighborhood and place them on my father's roof. And drink beer. The crow loved to drink beer.

So Dad had experience with wild animals. After he came back from being stationed in Germany during the Vietnam War, he got a job at the Staten Island Zoo. He worked with the birds of prey and big cats for a while. But he also worked in the herpetological area—the reptile area. It was only natural that when my brother and I were born, Dad passed his love for animals down to us. When he was laid off from working at the zoo, he got a job at the post office, and he never professionally worked with animals again. I don't remember the time he spent at the zoo, because I was too young, but I imagine he was happy then. Happy enough to keep the various newspaper clippings from the *Staten Island Advance* of him holding newborn leopards. I still look at these yellowed papers from time to time, proud that my dad actually got to help raise these wild cats.

But we didn't own any snakes or pets during our time in New York. It wasn't until we moved to Central Florida in 1984, a place with a healthy snake population and an area of the country less developed than New York City, that Dad rekindled his interest. He couldn't resist trekking out into the wilderness to observe snakes in the wild. And he couldn't resist educating my brother and me about these misunderstood and often-feared creatures.

Our treks starting off as small turn-offs from the main highway after grocery shopping or eating out.

“I just want to see something,” Dad said, and we allowed him to drive us through the sandy back roads of Central Florida. He was the leader in our family, someone we always turned to (and still do) when we needed answers. Even Mom looked up to him. She often refused to answer our questions about the world and life in general. “Ask your father,” she said. “He knows these things.”

And he usually did, or at least he pretended like he did. So during our first dozen snake hunts, we thought it normal for Dad to decide the direction we should take and follow it. He only spent about ten minutes driving on dirt roads looking for snakes, and when we saw our first one—a small glass snake that shimmered in the afternoon sun—my brother and I were hooked.

Mom, however, was not interested in snakes like we were. She had spent too much time growing up in a world frightened by them. Yet she never discouraged us from learning from Dad, and she would often come with us on our hunts. She learned things, too. Dad taught us the differences between kingsnakes and venomous coral snakes, how to handle wild snakes, and that snakes track their prey by smelling the air with their forked tongues. We also learned about the beauty of these creatures, amplified by full-color books that we got from the library or bought for our house about the native snakes of the Southeast. For my brother and me, beauty was the blue-black iridescent sheen of the endangered Eastern Indigo snake and the black-and-white checkered belly of the corn snake.

After the first snake hunts, Dad started collecting snakes, keeping some of the wild corn snakes and kingsnakes he saw while we were out. And he was always on the look out for more snakes. The late afternoon I spotted the disappearing racer was a typical snake hunting session. These sessions happened during the summer months, often on Saturday evenings when we used

to treat ourselves and eat out, when it didn't get truly dark until eight. After dinner, our bellies full and satisfied, we drove into the undeveloped areas near our town of Oviedo. Towns like Chuluota and Geneva—mere blips on a map with barely enough of a population to fill the restaurant we had just eaten at. Places where neighbors were miles away and houses were tucked underneath the wild weeds and yellow-green Florida grass. Land left for wild animals to flourish and multiply. A snake paradise.

Since snakes are cold-blooded, they usually don't come out during the hot, stifling Florida summer days. Instead, they come out after the afternoon thunderstorms, when the ground has cooled and the humidity hangs in the air like words on the tips of tongues. By this time, the sun has started to set, and dusk veils the pine trees and thorny shrubs in a grayish hue.

That's when their slender bodies slither through the brush, their tongues flickering and tasting the air, searching for a meal or a mate. And that's when Dad, Mom, my brother, and I started the hunt, the search for these reptiles. That's when we felt closest to nature, living among these almost-silent creatures. It's when we were closest to each other, each unified in one single goal: to find a snake.

Growing up with snakes taught my brother and me that snakes were neither bad nor scary. We aren't like the people who freak out when they see any snake in their yards, take a shovel, and hack these snakes' heads off. They do this for the children, they say. To protect the children.

This is barbaric. Snakes will not run after you and attack you. They will not bite unless provoked. You rarely find snakes hiding in your house somewhere, ready to strangle you to death. As long as you're careful where you step, the odds of getting bitten by a venomous snake

are almost zero. Coral snakes, one of Florida's most venomous snakes, are so docile that they will most likely only strike if you step on them. And their fangs are so tiny that if you're wearing jeans or boots, those fangs will probably not be able to penetrate your skin.

The first time I saw a coral snake was in my parents' kitchen. I was ten years old. It was nighttime, and I was making S'mores in the microwave. The power went out while the plate in the microwave turned, and darkness seeped through the house like tar. Mom and I grabbed some candles and lit them. I checked on my S'mores. They were gooey and warm enough to satisfy me.

As I bit into my dessert, Dad walked in the front door, coming home from working nights at the post office. He held a flashlight. Its bulb flashed in my face, blinding me. Dad had a pillowcase in his other hand. He walked towards Mom and me, his mustache and grin lopsided, as if he was keeping a secret. His keys jangled on the side of his belt loop. He let out a laugh and shook his head, stopping in the kitchen.

"Come here," he said to the both of us.

I walked to him. He kept still, his thick body like an oak. He wanted to show me something in the pillowcase. He had brought snakes home before, many times. This time, though, I felt different, maybe because Mom stood back, far away from Dad, or maybe it was because the power was out and I could barely see, but for a brief second, and perhaps for the first time in my ten-year-old life, I was unsure about looking in the pillowcase. My father had never harmed me before, and he had never put me in danger, so I walked to him anyway, even though doubt crept in my stomach, ready to burst forth, if need be, and save me.

"What's in there?" Mom asked, still far away.

“Just look,” Dad said, and his smile widened, straightening out to a smooth curve across his five-o-clock shadow.

Dad opened the pillowcase, but I couldn’t see anything yet. Mom stared from far away, the glow of the candles bouncing across her tightened lips and glasses.

Dad lifted the flashlight up and pointed it directly in the pillowcase. He looked down at me, pleading for me to hurry up and look inside, now that I could see.

Curled up beneath itself, like folded, thick wire, the snake looked up at me and tasted the air with its tongue. Its head was black with a yellow stripe. Its whole body had these thin yellow stripes, separated by black and red ones. The red areas looked dirty, as if some of the black rubbed off on it. I sucked in some breath as I remembered the rhyme. Red on yellow, kill a fellow. Red on black, friend of Jack. This snake was venomous, a coral snake. I knew this from the mountains of snake books and guides we had around the house, even though this was my first time ever seeing one up close.

“Cool,” I said, a little frightened and uneasy, but more comfortable because of the snake’s and Dad’s demeanors; both were non-threatening and calm. The snake looked up at me with curiosity and kindness, not like it wanted to strike. Not like some people who feared snakes would imagine. The snake was so small and thin, much smaller than the non-venomous black racers I saw all the time.

“What’s in there?” Mom repeated, and this time she walked over and looked in the pillowcase. She immediately jumped back and smiled, an uncomfortable smile, one that looked as if it was held up by invisible hooks, the type of smile people get when they are embarrassed or don’t know what kind of expression to make. “Is that what I think it is?”

Dad laughed through his teeth, excited. He nodded and grinned.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Mom screamed, still holding her smile.

“Calm down,” Dad said, his smile disappearing and tone become harsher. “Don’t frighten the snake.”

Mom shook her head and started walking away, mumbling something under her breath that I couldn’t even begin to decipher, but I knew it probably had some curse words in it. She was still smiling, though. She told Michael about the snake, and he stepped out of his room to join us. Michael had never seen a coral snake either, and he stared down at it, his thick glasses making his eyes look even wider than they were. We asked Dad a million questions: *Where did you find it? How did you catch it? What are you going to do with it?* He answered: *Just driving home. He’s just like a normal snake. Of course I’m going to let him go.* His answers were brusque; he didn’t revel in the details. Instead, he enjoyed showing us his catch.

The three of us stood around the pillowcase, like it was a sacred shrine to a time that would soon be laid to rest and covered with dust.

The next day the four of us drove out into the marsh near Lake Jessup. We found the perfect spot: a field across from the lake as big as an airstrip. Dad carried the coral snake in a see-through plastic container. A blue lid with holes drilled into it allowed the snake to breathe. Even Mom walked through the high grass with us until Dad bent down and opened the lid. The coral snake slowly slithered out and made its way into the field, away from us. It never tried to harm us.

This does not mean, however, that snakes aren’t something to be feared. There’s always a potential to get seriously hurt when dealing with large snakes or venomous ones. Given the years

Dad spent working at the zoo, he knew how to handle them. Even domestic animals, if approached in the wrong way, can cause damage. The average person doesn't have to handle snakes if he or she is scared of them. In fact, I encourage people to just walk away from snakes, rather than overreacting and killing them.

But even when I spout this information to people, when I tell them that I have encountered venomous snakes and have survived without killing them, they don't care. One of our neighbors would regularly find venomous and non-venomous snakes in her yard, and though she knew our family could handle them, she always decided to kill the snakes instead. Our neighborhood lost so many snakes this way. Snakes just tend to bring out the worst in some people; they bring out a human's killer instinct. An otherwise normal individual who would never harm a dog or a cat will, without thought, chop a snake to bits. Even some people who humanely trap raccoons or squirrels when they become pesky would not humanely trap a snake. Why bother, they think, when it's easier to kill them?

On the other hand, I have an irrational fear of insects. And unlike snakes, insects crawl into your house, invade your home, your life. They fly into you, crawl onto you, get stuck in your hair. You find them in your food, in your house, in your walls. Florida has so many insects that never a day goes by that I don't encounter some sort of bug. Which makes me wonder, if my father was an entomologist and kept bugs instead of snakes, what kind of person would I be today? I would probably want to kiss the nose of a June beetle, rather than wanting to cuddle next to the cool green, scaly body of a Burmese python.

Keeping snakes separated our family from others. The neighbor who habitually killed snakes always shivered and groaned when entering our house, which she had to do often since

she was my best friend's mother. Having the snakes around provided intrigue to friends I met at school who would otherwise never get to see snakes. Still, having the snakes felt so normal to me that I was surprised when my friends were shocked to see the dozens of aquariums and containers that lined our garage and sometimes our living room (if in the winter).

"My mom would die if she saw this," my friends always said, and I smiled, secretly proud that our hobby could affect anyone so deeply.

At one point our snake inventory included more than 100 snakes. This was because Dad spent time breeding boa constrictors. We also had a Brazilian rainbow boa, a pair of black kingsnakes, a pair of Eastern kingsnakes, a Florida pine snake, corn snakes, yellow rat snakes, a red-tailed boa, a scarlet king, and Eastern hognose snakes. Reading about them when I was younger was like a fairy tale, their Latin names rolling off my tongue, now a mournful song of what used to be. *Epicrates cenchria*, *Lampropeltis getulus niger*, *Pituophis melanoleucus mugitus*, *Coelognathus flavolineatus*.

But there were others out there like our family. Once a month the Central Florida Herpetological Society (CFHS) held meetings at Edgewater High School in Orlando. My family simply called them snake meetings. When my brother and I went with Dad to these meetings (Mom joining us only occasionally), we stopped at a milkshake stand that we passed on the way there. I always had a vanilla malt, and since I was so small, the malt would last the entire snake meetings. In my early twenties, I went searching for that milkshake stand, and I never found it. Dad says it closed down long ago.

Before the actual meetings, where experts in herpetology presented their recent research, the members peddled their wares inside and on the steps outside the auditorium. Albino pythons

as thick as telephone poles that wrapped around and covered your whole body. Red-headed skinks. Lizards with bright heads and stubby feet. Red-footed tortoises. Crickets. Rats. Mice. Cages. Heat lamps. Anything having to do with the keeping of reptiles. They sold everything, and we sold our snakes, too, not ones we captured from the wild, but exotic ones, like the boas, that Dad bred.

The first time I was given responsibility was at one of these meetings. I was eleven, not yet the angst-ridden, trouble-making pre-teen that I would soon be. I sat on the stage of the auditorium, its waxy floor cool on my tan legs. Dad had placed plastic bins and glass cages around me in a circle. Each bin contained at least one snake. One bin had dozens and dozens of baby boa constrictors in it, babies bred from a pair Dad bought six months prior.

“Watch the stuff,” Dad said and started to walk away.

“But,” I squeaked out. He didn’t hear. Dad had never left me alone with the snakes at a meeting before. Usually if he had to use the restroom, Michael was with me. Older and a little more confident at handling snakes, my brother always was able to talk to potential customers. But he wasn’t there; he was with friends. He was growing apart from us as he entered his teens and became more concerned with the politics of high school.

But now Dad left me alone, and it would not have been so scary if he wasn’t leaving me alone with the Brazilian rainbow boa, the meanest snake we ever had. The snake always took the opportunity to strike at Dad when he could. Still, Dad kept him. Brazilian rainbows are believed to be one of the most beautiful snakes in the world, and many herp-lovers long to own one. Dad was hoping for a big pay-off with the rainbow.

The moment came, right when I was thinking about it, right when Dad was out of sight.

An older man, perhaps in his sixties, walked up to me. He wore a blue button-down shirt with navy suspenders. He had a baseball hat on, and his glasses were thin. His appearance was normal for the snake meeting—so many different types of people kept snakes.

“Is that a rainbow?” he asked, bending down to peer through the glass. When he spoke, his jowls shook like vanilla pudding. “Can I see him?”

“No,” I quickly said, but I didn’t know how to explain myself. I wasn’t even sure if I was supposed to tell the man that the rainbow was mean, because I thought maybe Dad was trying to get rid of the snake, and telling everyone it was mean would have made it harder. But I told the jiggly-jowled man that the rainbow was mean anyway, just because I didn’t want to seem like a wimp, like I didn’t want to handle the snakes, even though I definitely didn’t want to try to handle the rainbow.

“Then what about these babies over here,” the man said, moving on to the plastic bin that housed the baby boas. There must have been at least thirty of them in there, huddled up against each other for warmth and companionship. They were a rippling mass of brown and green.

I was comfortable handling the boas, but there were so many of them that I was afraid to take the lid off, afraid that they would all slither out, and then Dad would blame me for losing them.

“Um,” I stuttered.

“Let me just take a look,” the man said and went to open the lid.

I stopped him. It wasn’t just that I didn’t want to let the babies escape, but I also didn’t want some stranger letting the babies escape, or even stealing one while I wasn’t looking.

I pushed the old man’s crinkled hands away from the lid, and I began to open the bin. I

took my time, only opening a corner, a crack. I opened it a little bit more, then a bit more, and a bit more until I was able to stick my tiny, thin hands into the bin to reach a baby.

As soon as I put my hand in, a dozen babies reached out and bit me. I snatched my hand away, but only out of surprise. Because the boas' mouths were so small, barely the size of my fingernails, their bites felt like gentle kisses. I placed my hand back in the bin, determined to grab a baby or two, and they bit me over and over again, probably frustrated because I made no reaction. This was the first time I had to make a decision on my own, a decision to go back in and face a fight. This would not be the last time I faced something dangerous, and even though I came out of this particular situation with no permanent damage, the feeling I got from placing my hands into something unknown, that heart-fluttering, palm-sweating feeling, was addicting. I was a superhero. I could do anything. Or so I thought.

Finally I grabbed a boa for the man, pulled it out, and quickly closed the lid. The man took the baby and put him close to his face, inspecting, thinking, deciding. Then he gave the baby back to me.

"Thanks," he said and walked away.

I couldn't wait for Dad to return so that I could tell him I got my first snake bite. Other kids were eager to show their parents trophies they won for sports or at school clubs. As I placed the baby back in the bin, the snakes struck at me again, and I felt sorry for them. They thought they were intimidating, but they were actually just helpless, barely making the impact they desired, even though they impacted me in a different way.

Although snakes were normal for me as a child, I don't own snakes today. I'm too scared to keep a pet snake. Not scared of the snake, of course, but of feeding the snake.

Because we had so many snakes when I was younger, we had to have a lot of mice. Big mice. Little mice. Pinkies, which are newborns, their eyes closed, their bodies not yet furry. All of the mice, except for the pinkies, had to be knocked out before they could be fed to the snakes. This is because live, healthy mice could potentially scratch and bite, hurting or injuring a tame snake with no real hunting practice.

I watched Dad feed the snakes only a handful of times. I couldn't handle more. He would take one of the mice and clip a hemostat to its tail. With swift, heavy motions, my father slammed the mouse on a wooden board he kept in the garage. The deep thud, thud, thud of the slamming made me ears ache with disgust. After the mouse was successfully knocked out, but hopefully not dead (snakes prefer live prey), Dad quickly dropped it in the cage of one of the snakes.

The snake would coil back and strike, as if the mouse needed to be conquered. And then it would wrap its thick body around the helpless prey, constricting, squeezing, preparing, until satisfied. Dislocating its jaw in order to fit the mouse in its mouth, the snake gulped its meal down whole. After the mouse was in, I watched as the large lump of meat was pushed through the snake's body.

The image of the knocked-out mice, blood trickling down their mouths, blood splattered on the wooden board, haunts me, yet Dad never reacted badly to these tasks. They needed to be done in order to keep the snakes, and my father, having years of practice, performed these tasks like a professional. He once told me that he saved an owl from an animal trap when he was a teenager, and when he pried the owl from the trap, he had to cut off one of its legs because it was so badly damaged.

“How’d you do that?” I had asked him.

“With a pair of scissors.”

I winced, but his face showed no sign of remorse or guilt. He was only concerned with saving the owl, and he did what he had to do, like knocking out the mice to feed the snakes. I know that feeding snakes live mice is just the circle of life, but I don’t want to be the one to introduce any animals to their demise. Maybe this is why I find killing snakes for protection of children so barbaric. I can’t even bring myself to kill a roach or spider, and I’m so scared of them that I have slept outside in my car before because a wolf spider blocked the entryway to my house. I would rather be uncomfortable than see another animal suffer.

And so I don’t own snakes. Death also played a part in helping Dad to decide to stop keeping snakes. Not the deaths of mice, though. Snake deaths. I was in middle school. It felt like one day we were living among snakes, immersed in the snake culture, serpents breeding and slithering in their cages in the garage and living room, occasionally escaping to rest in our bathtub, and the next day we had no snakes and forgot about that life.

Our snakes kept dying, and the guilt ate at my father like acid. The baby boas he bought had a neurological disease, similar to Joe the crow’s condition, which caused them to flop about on top of each other. My father said if he only separated them, instead of keeping them together, when he first purchased them, then none of that would have happened. The disease could have been contained, but it was too late.

And the baby black kingsnakes that my father hatched died, too. They wouldn’t eat. They starved.

Their parents died soon after that. The male bit Dad one day, latching onto his thumb for

no real good reason, because the kingsnakes were tame, never aggressive. When the kingsnake bit down on my father's thumb, he wouldn't let go. Dad tried shaking the snake off. Still there. Then he poured liquor down his throat, hoping the snake would let go. But he didn't. So my father had to put him underwater, and finally the snake's jaw unhinged, and Dad got his thumb back, intact.

About a month later, tumors developed on that same kingsnake's body, and he suddenly died. My father still blames himself, blames the burning whiskey he poured down the snake's throat. He tells me this only when I ask him to recall the story or to retell the story to one of my friends. Other than that, he never talks about this guilt.

Shortly thereafter, the female kingsnake died. At the time, my father didn't tell me how, so I imagined the snake died of heartbreak, and this is something I often told my friends who were scared of snakes, to make snakes seem more human. I imagined the female hunched over her water bowl, her mouth open, trying to scream, but nothing coming out but her thin, black tongue. And then with one silent cry, she flipped over and writhed in sadness, mourning her lover. Dead.

Recently Dad told me the real story: She had somehow escaped from her cage, and my parents couldn't find her. She ended up taking shelter under the lawn mower, wrapped around the blades. So when my father went to mow the lawn, he heard a screeching, death-rattling noise. And he saw the bloody, black and red snake parts. All over the lawn. He felt so ashamed of this that he didn't tell my brother and me the truth for a long time.

The deciding moment to get rid of the snakes came when Dad bought two Eastern kingsnakes, beautiful black and yellow snakes, highly desired in the herpetological community.

The snakes were babies when Dad bought them, and he planned to breed them. They grew up apart from each other. When they matured, Dad put them together and left them alone to do their business.

Kingsnakes are called “kings” because they eat other snakes. Like the king cobra. So when Dad returned to the cage, the male had eaten the female. Dad didn’t know why. The snake wasn’t starving or particularly aggressive. Perhaps the stress of being in captivity drove the snake mad. Nevertheless, Dad was devastated and angry with himself. He couldn’t take it anymore. He hated to see all the living creatures around him die. I wonder if he was nervous that death could become contagious, that if he kept the snakes and they continued to die, their untimely deaths could rub off on one of us. Maybe he feared not just burying the snakes, but failing with his children and wife, too. Dad never told me about his fears, but I imagine it was possible for him to fear losing his family, because if death were all around me, I would be reminded of the biggest aspects of my life that I could lose.

To me, though, my father isn’t a failure. He’s someone who showed me how to love something that others fear. In essence, he taught me my first lessons in tolerance, lessons that have expanded and become more complex throughout the years. Perhaps without this first taste of what it means to accept something scary and different I would be a whole other person.

The other day I saw my first snake of the spring season. I was taking my dog for a walk in the grassy expanse outside my apartment, near the cemetery, and coiled up in a pile was a small orange snake, no more than a foot long. Its head reached up into the air, perpendicular to the sky, and its mouth was wide open.

The snake had died in this position, from what looked like natural causes, because it

wasn't run over or pecked at by birds or other predators. This snake was just out for a little stroll and died, in mid-scream, or so it looked.

I immediately called Dad. Whenever I see any snake, or even any wild animals that I've never seen before, I call him. During these moments, when I describe to him what I just saw, the colors, the position of the animal, its behavior, we are transformed back to times we used to share, when we would spend the time before the sun set snake hunting, bonding, sharing. Our voices squeak with excitement. I ask my father a million questions, like he's an expert. And he is. He's my expert.

"It's just a common snake," he said. "But it's getting to be that time of year."

And he agreed with me: The snake must have died of natural causes. Just a common, regular snake, he said. Just like now we have common, regular lives, I thought as I hung up the phone and knelt down next to the still, dead snake.

After seeing the black racer escape that one night when the cicadas hung in the trees and humidity in the Central Florida dusk comforted me, I climbed back into the van. It was almost dark, but there were miles of dirt road to explore and hunt.

Dad put the car in drive, and we started rolling, still keeping our low speed of five miles an hour. I scanned the roads, hoping to see something else, hoping to be able to catch a snake and bring it home. Or just interact with the snake, providing it with a glimpse of human nature.

The cicadas sang louder and louder as the sky grew darker. I didn't want Dad to give up yet, but I knew that hunting would be harder when it was completely dark, so I paid extra attention to each blade of grass, each grain of sand, every gust of wind, determined to see something that would pique Dad's interests. I told myself that I would find a snake, and I would

be the one to hold it and place it in the white pillowcase.

But still there was nothing. Just the cicadas and the silence of Dad, Mom, and Michael. I didn't want to leave the place, and I dreamed of growing older and building a house out there on several acres, where my family could come over and go snake hunting on foot, rather than having to hunt in a clunky van. I wanted to stay like that forever, but I knew I wouldn't. I knew I'd eventually have to go home.

THE KING OF EVERYTHING

Jeff didn't really care that he and his family were going to Golden, Colorado, for winter break. He had been once or twice to visit his aunt, uncle, and cousins, but never during the winter. Jeff's father cared about the trip, though. "I'm going to show you what winter really is," his father had said to him and his mother. But when they first arrived in Denver and took their first steps out of the airport and into the Rocky Mountain air, his father had winced.

"What's going on with this weather?" Jeff's father asked his uncle once they had piled six suitcases into the van. Jeff looked at his mother's porcelain face, and they both smiled, sharing enjoyment at his father's expense.

"Isn't it beautiful?" his uncle said. "We haven't had any snow yet. No ice either."

His father grumbled.

"Where's Kyle?" Jeff asked. Jeff wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing his cousin, but he thought it polite to ask anyway. Besides, Kyle was the only non-adult company he would have over the break.

"At home, probably in his room as usual," Jeff's uncle said.

That's exactly where Kyle was once the family arrived at Jeff's uncle's house. Muted, drum-filled, heavy music flowed through the closed door of Kyle's room and down to the living room.

"We're here," Jeff's uncle yelled from the foyer. "Now get your ass out here and say hello to your family."

Jeff looked down at the brown carpet, ashamed hearing his uncle talk like that. Jeff could

barely even remember his father ever cursing. But Jeff's uncle tapped him on the shoulder with his fist and gave him a wink. Jeff joined the others in the kitchen, only half-listening to the adult conversations going on. Stuff like mortgage payments, holiday bonus checks, things that sixteen-year-olds didn't care about. He stayed close to his mother, watching her thin jaw move up and down while she talked to his aunt.

Kyle finally came down to eat dinner. He fit the profile of an anti-social, rebellious teenager, with his long, oily hair, pock-marked face, and heavy metal t-shirts. He sat down at the dinner table without ever saying hello.

They had lamb chops, a food that Jeff hated, but he knew it to be his mother's favorite, so he put up with it. His father talked almost the entire time, about how Denver used to be when he was growing up. Jeff tried not to pay attention. He had heard it all before. Denver was a great place to grow up, his father thought, with lots of wilderness to explore and changing seasons. But Jeff's father's job was back in Georgia. So that was where they had to live.

Once the family was finished with dinner, the adults decided to go to bed. Everyone had a long day, and they wanted to drive to Rocky Mountain National Park the next day. Jeff's mother kissed him goodnight and asked if he needed anything, which he didn't. Kyle and Jeff were left alone to watch *Seinfeld* reruns in the dark living room.

The flashing green glow of the TV splayed across Kyle's face, making him look reptilian. Jeff had to force his face forward. He didn't want to get caught staring too long at this creepy phenomenon happening on his cousin's face. After about a half hour of avoiding Kyle's face, Kyle turned toward him and said in a low voice, "I have a bomb."

Green colors danced across Kyle's face. *Did he just say that he has a bomb?* It was the

only thing Kyle had really said to him all night.

“I have a bomb,” Kyle repeated. The living room was dark and empty. There was no one around to save him if his cousin went crazy and blew the place up.

Jeff didn’t know how to respond, so he shrugged, trying to act unalarmed. Kyle turned away, and Jeff continued to watch the green light ripple across Kyle’s face.

Jeff remembered the last visit to Colorado, how Kyle tried to get Jeff to play shooting video games with him. They were only eleven then. But Jeff had never been interested in violence or boy games like that when he was growing up. He didn’t like G.I. Joes, playing with toy guns, he never climbed a tree or took part in sports. Now he was sixteen, and he still didn’t like these things.

When he was in sixth and seven grade, Jeff had even thought he might be gay. Not because he was attracted to boys, but because he didn’t seem to like the dangerous, reckless activities that most boys his age loved. He thought he was gay until he met Kristen Johnston, a new girl in his class who had just moved to Atlanta from Florida. Jeff saw her walk into the classroom one day, with combat boots on and a camouflage tank top, and he needed a notebook to hide his erection for the rest of the class period. Every time he thought of her, every time he imagined her soft, black hair tossed across his arm or face, he needed the notebook. No, he definitely wasn’t gay.

“It’s a pipe bomb,” Kyle said. “My brother helped me make it. I’ll show it to you tomorrow.”

Breathing easier, Jeff realized it was just a homemade pipe bomb, something boys like Kyle liked to make. He wasn’t planning on blowing up the house. No, he just wanted to play

around, maybe blow a bomb up in the middle of nowhere, not harming anyone.

Kyle didn't say anything else the rest of the night, and Jeff didn't care about seeing a bomb, but the next day, when Jeff's father decided that they would take a tour of Coors Brewery, rather than go to the park because the weather wasn't cold enough yet, and the boys didn't want to go (What would be the point? They weren't old enough to drink anyway.), Kyle offered to show Jeff the bomb again, and because there was really nothing else to do, Jeff agreed to see it.

The bomb wasn't in the house, though. They were going to have to ride bikes to the location. Jeff rode Kevin's old bike. Kevin was Kyle's brother, older than them and already in college. He had decided to spend most of winter break at the dorms of his college in Ft. Collins so that Jeff's parents had a place to sleep, although he had promised to come down to Golden for Christmas. Jeff's aunt had given Jeff Kevin's old leather jacket with warm padding inside. The jacket was too large for Jeff and made him look like a black marshmallow puff. And as he rode the bike through the foothills, the arms of the jacket kept sliding down onto Jeff's knuckles and the handlebars, causing Jeff's ride to be wobbly as he had to keep pushing the sleeves up. The day was grey, but still mild. The air smelled tinny and burned his nostrils as they weaved their way up and through the hills.

Jeff's father had been right. The cold of the Rocky Mountains was sharper and more intense than that in Georgia. And the Rockies made Brasstown Bald, Georgia's highest point, look like a baby hill—something easily conquered in comparison to the snow-covered peaks (many of which reached over 14,000 feet) that he now rode parallel to. Jeff had known this about the mountains already, of course, having been to Colorado many times. But it was different in the winter. The frigid air did something to the appearance of the mountains, making them more

peaceful and more lonely-looking at the same time.

After riding their bikes for about twenty minutes, Kyle turned onto a small trail, leading Jeff into the woods and finally to an abandoned trailer next to a clearing. A sign on the side of the trailer said, “B & B Construction.” B & B had decided to build something in these woods, but it obviously never happened.

Propping their bikes against the trailer, Jeff and Kyle walked in. The inside was not much warmer than the outside, and it was littered with objects—pieces of wood that resembled swords, skinny hair clips, pieces of chalk, and an empty suitcase with a large hole ripped in the middle. The twelve-by-sixty foot area had a lived-in feel, and Jeff suspected that Kyle spent a lot of his time here.

Haphazardly strewn over a rolling office chair was a tiny, A-cup lacy black bra. Kyle quickly said it belonged to his girlfriend. How could Kyle have gotten to second base when Jeff had only French-kissed a girl?

“You can touch it,” Kyle said, picking up the bra and shoving it in Jeff’s direction. “If you want.”

Jeff didn’t know what to do, but he thought that Kyle was probably lying anyway. This wouldn’t be Jeff’s first time feeling a bra (he had felt his mother’s, a couple of times, when he needed to do laundry and had to move his parents’ clothes to the dryer), but he had never felt one so small and tiny. So Jeff took it from Kyle. The bra was thin, most likely worn that way from the calluses on Kyle’s fingers, and felt fragile in Jeff’s hands.

Kyle sat down in the chair in front of the desk and opened up a grey filing cabinet. He took three slender, metal tubes with fuses on the end and placed them on top of the cabinet. The

bombs were not as Jeff had imagined. Instead of being round and black with a long fuse, like the bombs on cartoons, these bombs were skinny and long. They looked harmless.

“Here they are,” Kyle said. “Kevin and I used to make them and blow them up all the time, but he hasn’t been here that often since starting school.”

Still holding the bra between his fingers, Jeff walked over to the filing cabinet to inspect the bombs. He reached out for one and picked it up, its body cool and just as heavy as a wrench. The world shivered around him.

“How’d you make it?”

“Potassium nitrate, charcoal, sulfur. Some pipes. Fuses. You can find the ingredients anywhere, really.”

Kyle placed two bombs in his coat pocket and walked out of the trailer. Jeff stared at the bomb left behind, placed the bra back on its chair, and followed Kyle out to the woods. They walked away from the clearing, deeper into the woods, the leaves crunching underneath their feet. Kyle kept quiet the entire way. The temperature dropped by the minute until Jeff felt his spiky hair and noticed it was wet from the light snow that had just started to fall, so light it was barely noticeable beneath the thick trees.

After ten minutes of walking, Kyle stopped near a large log and took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. He handed a cigarette to Jeff, too, and before Jeff could tell him no, he grabbed it and the lighter from Kyle’s hand.

This wasn’t Jeff’s first time smoking a cigarette. It happened once before, at a friend of a friend’s party. Kristen Johnston and her friends had been sitting outside, smoking cigarettes by the pool.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Kristen had said to him, the lights reflecting the sparkles in her eyeshadow, when he asked if he could bum one. It was the only thing she said to him the entire night. Kristen and her friends spent the rest of the night smoking by the pool, talking about Joy Division, the Smiths, and Bauhaus—bands they liked because their older siblings liked them, so they had learned to like them too. Jeff didn’t say anything. He had no siblings, and he had never heard of the bands they mentioned, but he went home that night and downloaded some of their songs. Their melodies were dark and deep, like music for a rainy day. Although Jeff didn’t necessarily enjoy listening to the bands, he listened to them often, imagining Kristen doing the same.

As Jeff inhaled this time, with Kyle by his side, he had to suppress the urge to cough. The smoke tasted bitter and strong, yet he kept puffing on the filter. If he was going to blow something up, he might as well look bad ass doing it.

Kyle took one pipe bomb from his pocket, motioned for Jeff to stay in his place, and walked away. The snow was falling so hard now that Jeff didn’t know if he would even be able to see the explosion from far away, but he supposed it was safer this way. Jeff felt good standing there, feeling the snow fall, thinking about how he didn’t have to hang out with his dad for the whole day. This is probably what it would have been like growing up, Jeff thought, if he had a brother. Hell, maybe even a sister would have been better than not having anyone at all.

Kyle stopped, bent down for a few seconds, then he turned back to Jeff and started running, a small cloud of smoke rising behind him, his feet pounding up to Jeff, until he stood next to him, his breath coming out in thick white puffs, and said, “Any second now.”

The explosion only lasted for a second, but it was high and loud and powerful. The

distance was no issue. The flash of red and plume of smoke filled the sky. Jeff's pulse beat harder in his wrists and neck, and as the smoke from the bomb started drifting toward them, it got caught in Jeff's nose, a sweet and bitter smell, not unlike fireworks. The bomb cloud was much more enjoyable than the cigarette cloud. Jeff kept staring at the place where the bomb had gone off.

"Wanna do another one?" Kyle asked.

Jeff widened his eyes.

Kyle laughed and said, "Follow me."

The two walked side-by-side until they reached the place of the original explosion, a circular area of flat dirt, free of dead leaves. Jeff no longer noticed the fat flakes of snow accumulating on the foliage and ground.

"You can light this one," Kyle said, handing him the frigid metal cylinder and lighter from his pocket. Jeff's fingers and toes started tingling as he bent down, placed the bomb on the ground, and lit the fuse.

The bomb let out a slow *tssss* noise, and Kyle grabbed Jeff and started running back to the log, their feet moving as if to the rhythm of a Joy Division song. They reached the log, breathing deeply, their breaths pumping out white clouds in the icy air.

Seconds seemed to go by, and Jeff felt the anticipation rise in him like a near-boiling pot of water. Why was it taking so long this time? Jeff couldn't wait anymore. He needed to see the bomb, the explosion, the fire, the smoke, the noise.

The bomb exploded, a high-pitched scream in the lonely wilderness. Jeff closed his eyes and breathed in the salty sweetness of the smoke. When he opened his eyes again, Kyle was

standing up, lighting another cigarette. He seemed calm. His hands weren't trembling, and his foot wasn't tapping, not like Jeff's. It must have been because Kyle had seen such explosions many times before.

"We should get going," Kyle said. "Before it starts snowing harder."

Oh, the snow. Jeff had forgotten. The ground, the trees, the leaves, everything was covered in a thin layer of white. The boys walked back to the trailer, got on their bikes, and rode fifteen minutes home through the snow and ice and winter.

"Where'd you go?" Jeff's mother said, running over to Jeff in the foyer, feeling his forehead and hair. "You should've taken an umbrella."

"We didn't know it was going to snow," Jeff said.

"Well, go change into some dry clothes. We're making dinner, and Dad can't wait to share his brewery story."

Jeff rolled his eyes. He walked to the basement, where his aunt and uncle had made up a futon for him, and changed his clothes. Even his underwear was wet, somehow. He never wanted his parents to know that he had just exploded a pipe bomb—two pipe bombs. What would his mother think? She always seemed to be on the edge of something to Jeff, perhaps on the edge of a breakdown. She was a petite woman, insanely skinny and short, who knew about selling houses and the real estate market, but she wouldn't know what it meant for a boy to blow something up.

Jeff and his mother used to watch reruns of *M*A*S*H* together when he was younger, and he always remembered her crying during the show. "Those brave people," she always said. Jeff had held onto his mother and let her cry, staining his shirt with tears. Where had his father been? He should have been there, not Jeff. This was his job. But Jeff did it anyway. He wanted to

be a doctor like the ones on *M*A*S*H*, so when he got into middle school and high school, he spent most of his time studying, focusing on his Advanced Placement exams.

Everyone was already at the table by the time Jeff got to the dining room. Kyle hadn't even changed out of his wet clothes.

"You're never gonna believe what happened to me at the brewery," Jeff's father said. "I got carded!"

Jeff's mother, his aunt, his uncle, and his father all laughed and said some snarky things, like "last time that'll ever happen" and "that's because they thought you were *too* old." Jeff's father's face and hands were incredibly smooth for someone who was fifty years old. But hearing his father boast like that made Jeff want to puke.

"Eat some spaghetti," his father said to him.

"I'm not hungry."

"Of course you're hungry. Who isn't hungry?"

"I dunno."

"Jeff," his mother said, her voice low. "Just eat something."

"But I don't want to."

"Gosh darn it," his father said and got up from the table, his chair screeching against the hardwood floor. "Can't we just eat like a freaking family?"

Jeff's mother's mouth was rigid. Kyle's head was down, his hair almost touching his spaghetti. Jeff grabbed the bowl and spooned some spaghetti on his plate. His father sat back down, and the adults started talking again, but Jeff wasn't listening. He shoveled three or four forkfuls of spaghetti into his mouth, one after the other. The noodles slipped and slid through his

teeth and across his tongue. Jeff thought about detonating a bomb in the spaghetti bowl. He imagined the fat noodles spurting up from the bowl and landing on his father's head. His mother would laugh, and everyone would think it was an especially good trick, especially since no one would get hurt. Well, maybe his father would.

After dinner, the adults had coffee. Every ten minutes his father peeked out of the window in the living room to report on the snow accumulation. "It's covering the car," he would say, or "We're going to have to shovel in the morning." Jeff couldn't hear it anymore, so he went to bed early, curling up in the basement on the futon. But he couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about the pipe bomb, the explosion, the smell of sulfur.

Jeff overslept, mainly because snow blocked the sunlight from getting through the basement's half windows. Golden and its surrounding areas were covered with at least a foot of snow. Jeff rushed up the stairs. His parents were still in their robes, even though it was nearly eleven in the morning, drinking hot cocoa and tea, drinks made for days like this. Jeff wondered why no one had woken him to go to Rocky Mountain National Park.

"Didn't I tell you?" his father said. "Go ahead. Go look out the windows."

Jeff shuffled over to the large windows in the living room. He had to squint his eyes because the snow was so bright. It covered everything. This was what Jeff's father had been talking about. This was winter. With a vengeance. A completely different place than Atlanta.

Jeff hated that his father had been right.

Still, he stared at the white, fluffy landscape as his mother brought him a hot cup of cocoa.

"We're probably just gonna stay here today," she said to him. "Your father doesn't want

to drive in the snow.”

“I’m surprised he doesn’t think he’s the master of driving in the snow.”

“Oh, Jeff, please.”

“He thinks he’s the king of everything.”

Kyle came down the stairs, wearing black jeans and another heavy-metal t-shirt. His hair was just as oily as ever. Jeff wondered if he ever took a shower.

When Jeff’s mother left to join the others in the kitchen, Jeff quietly said, “We should blow up the other bomb.”

“I don’t know. They’re not going anywhere today.”

“Come on.” Jeff stared hard at his cousin, at the light stubble that had grown on his face overnight. Jeff didn’t understand why his cousin wouldn’t want to blow up another bomb. Besides, Kyle looked like someone who would go to school one day and open fire on his classmates, throwing bombs and grenades, taking pleasure in destruction. Like those kids from Columbine, which wasn’t actually that far away.

But voicing his concerns over parental supervision made Kyle seem small and pointless. He wasn’t menacing anymore.

“I guess we can pretend we’re going to the park to play in the snow,” Kyle said.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

Jeff popped up from the window and down to the basement. Adrenaline pushed him to shower and get dressed in less than fifteen minutes. He wondered what a bomb exploding in the snow would look like. Would it spray snow everywhere? Would it feel like it was snowing all over again?

“You’re not going to eat any breakfast?” his mother asked when she saw him putting on his cousin’s jacket and gloves.

“I’m fine,” Jeff said.

“Well.” His mother started washing a skillet. “Just be careful riding the bike. The roads are slippery.”

“Sure,” he said.

And then his mother turned off the running water, dried her hands, and embraced him, as if she could sense the testosterone pulsing through his body. Jeff felt exposed and pulled back.

Kyle pounded down the stairs, dressed in a wool coat and gloves. A black snow hat, scattered with white lint, hid his greasy hair.

“Ready?” he asked Jeff.

Jeff hadn’t even considered the difficulties of riding a bike in the snow. The roads were clear from the plows, and Kyle didn’t provide him with any tips or suggestions before Jeff mounted the bike and took off down the slanted driveway. He tried to concentrate on riding carefully and slowly so that he would not fall and also so that he could look at how the snow had enveloped the houses and foothills and the town. But Kyle was going so fast, and of course he didn’t care. Jeff had to keep adjusting the sliding sleeves of his jacket, and soon he felt the slick road beneath him through the tires. The bike lost its balance, and Jeff fell, the cold pavement striking his knee, tearing a quarter-sized hole in his jeans.

Stopping his bike, but not getting off, Kyle said, “We’re halfway there. Do you want to turn back?”

Jeff’s knee pulsed with heat so bad that he thought it might melt the ice on the road. A

one-inch cut, stuffed with bits of gravel and oozing blood, stood like a beacon on his knee. He shook his head and got up to mount the bike again. A bloody, bruised-up knee wasn't going to stop him.

“Try not to shift around while riding,” Kyle said.

“I'm okay.”

With every pound of the pedals, Jeff felt better and better. Like he was in control. The boys managed to reach the outskirts of the woods without Jeff falling again. They dismounted and walked their bikes to the trailer, the tires making fat snake trails through the thick snow. The only color in the forest was the deep red that painted Jeff's jeans. By the time they got into the trailer, Jeff's knee was numb from the cold.

“Are you okay?” Kyle said, kneeling down.

“Yeah. Let's just do it.”

Kyle grabbed the other pipe bomb left sitting on top of the filing cabinet from the day before. They set out in the snow, in the same direction—this time smoking cigarettes on the way there, the trails of smoke seemingly leading the way. The boys didn't talk to each other. Jeff felt comfortable here. He felt close to Kyle. Maybe the reason Jeff never liked the games that others enjoyed was because he had no one to share them with, no brother to show him how to enjoy danger.

When they reached the log, now just a snow-covered bulge in the middle of the woods, Kyle handed him the pipe bomb and said, “You can light it again.”

Overcome with a fluttering sensation in his chest, Jeff trekked to the same spot as the day before. Kyle stayed behind, chain-smoking cigarettes. The bomb's shell was icier than

yesterday's bombs, a result of the cold weather, most likely. Jeff had a poor time recognizing the spot. Snow covered every inch of the forest, and Jeff didn't know what to do. He was pretty sure he couldn't just place the bomb in the snow and expect it to go off. So he turned around to look at Kyle, the smoke clouding Kyle's head as he made swimming-like motions with his arms, which Jeff took to mean that he needed to clear the snow from the ground. Why had Kyle left him alone?

After making long, wave-like motions with his arms in the snow, Jeff cleared a spot on the forest floor. He bent over, placed the bomb in the dirt, and lit the fuse.

Jeff turned and started running back to Kyle. The snow felt deep and crunched beneath him. He tried to follow the same path he had taken before, so there would be less resistance, but his knee burned with pain each time his foot pounded the ground, and when he was halfway to Kyle, he fell and landed in the soft snow.

Time rushed by. Jeff knew he had to get up quick, before the explosion went off, so that he wouldn't get hurt and he could see it, but the low temperatures had frozen his limbs, making it hard for him to move. He heard the thumping of feet. Kyle lifted him up, his breath quick and visible.

"Hurry," Kyle said and turned to run back toward the log.

Jeff looked back at the bomb, a thin cloud of smoke looming over it. He followed Kyle's path through the snow, focusing on Kyle's wet and muddy jeans. When Jeff reached the log, he heard the loud crack of the bomb. He turned around, and all he saw was thick smoke, the wind not even carrying it to where the boys were. He had missed the explosion.

Disappointment seeped through Jeff's body. Not having any more bombs, the boys

walked back to the trailer in the same silent way they came, following their footsteps formed in the snow. Jeff would probably never see a bomb again, unless, of course, he became a doctor and went to war, like the people in *M*A*S*H*.

When they reached their bikes, Kyle turned to Jeff. His face thin and pale. He was smiling.

“This was cool,” he said, picking up his bike and leading it out of the woods. “I haven’t had this much fun since my brother left.”

“Yeah.”

“It was so cool, too. All this snow jumped up, almost like the bomb was scaring it.”

“It doesn’t snow like this in Atlanta.”

Reaching the end of the woods and the road, they mounted their bikes and started the ride home. Jeff managed not to fall again, even though he wasn’t really paying attention. All the white of his surroundings seemed to morph together into a blurry mess. He forgot about his knee and about his AP exams. He even managed to forget his father and Kristen Johnston. But he did think about how much he had wanted to see that bomb. And how disappointed his mom would be if she ever found out about any of this. For one brief moment Jeff had felt like he was the boss of something, like he had a purpose. And this was gone, and all that was left was the memory of that feeling, like a phantom limb.

When they entered Jeff’s uncle’s house, his father stood at the stove, cooking steaks, while his mother sat at the kitchen table, talking to his aunt. The heat from the house and the kitchen caused his knee to twinge with pain. Trying to hide his injury, Jeff hurried across the house and down into the basement.

“What happened?” his mother asked, coming down the stairs. “Did you fall?”

Jeff nodded.

His mother led him to the basement bathroom where she made him sit on the edge of the bathtub while she sat on the toilet, her vein-covered hands opening the peroxide bottle and pouring the liquid on his wound. The scrape sizzled and foamed.

“Does it hurt?” his mother asked.

It didn’t hurt at all. Jeff thought he would never forgive himself for being so stupid and foolish, for leaving his mother to play games and blow stuff up—all of it was just for one tiny glimpse of manhood that Jeff felt like he would never reach.

“I told you to be careful on the ice,” his mother said, using a wet washcloth to wipe the cut.

His mother took a Band-Aid from the wrapper, her eyes fixed on peeling the paper back from the sticky part and placing it on Jeff’s knee. She looked like she belonged in *M*A*S*H*, not really as an American, but maybe as a Korean, a person whose home was being invaded. She had the features of someone who could be Asian: dark hair, thin wrists, a slender body. Jeff imagined himself as a doctor rescuing her, but he couldn’t do anything at the moment. Instead, he let her fuss over his wounds, thinking that she was probably the king, not him.

THE PRACTICAL USE OF THE ENGINEERING SECTION IN THE STILLWATER PUBLIC LIBRARY

First is Jimmy, and all he wants to do is go down to the Stillwater Public Library on Divine Avenue, early Saturday morning, 'cause not that many people come around then (probably getting rid of their Friday night hangovers). When we get there, we find a quiet, cool corner in the back near the engineering books, just to ensure no one will be there. We make out until he unzips his jeans, and I whip up my red skirt, and even though he's big (after all, he is Italian), it feels good anyway, 'cause I just close my eyes and think of a young Davy Jones, from the time he was in the Monkees.

After school on Monday, while we're smoking weed in the woods near the library, I ask him why he always takes me to the library, instead of his house or something like that. Jimmy and I have been having sex off and on for about six months now. I'm pretty sure he knows that I fuck other boys from school, but he's never said anything about it to me.

"Gee Anna, I don't know." Jimmy scratches his overgrown black hair, takes a hit off the joint, and passes it to me. I inhale deeply, carefully capturing all the smoke my lungs can, and then I ease the smoke out of me in a slow, slightly seductive way. "My parents bother me."

I know Jimmy's lying, 'cause I know damn well his parents are a couple of trailer trashes living out in the boonies, hooked on drugs and alcohol. I know this because we get our drugs and alcohol from them. It's easier that way. Sometimes I grab a beer or two out of my parents' fridge when they're not around (which isn't that often), but they don't know about it. Jimmy's parents *let* us take their beer. They *give* him their weed for us to smoke.

“You’re shitting me, Jimmy,” I say and pass the joint back to him. “Your parents don’t give two shits about you.”

Jimmy finds this extremely funny, and he starts to laugh—quiet at first—but then he’s laughing so hard that the log we’re sitting on starts to fumble back and forth.

I don’t press the matter further, ‘cause I don’t really care about whether we do it in the library or at his house (I’m just trying to bust his balls). The truth is, I don’t care where we do it, as long as we do, ‘cause I’ve been having wet dreams about Jimmy since I was like four.

“Why don’t we ever go to *your* house? You live right around the corner.”

Instead of answering him, I smile and get up to travel back into the woods so I can go pee privately. But it’s hard pulling my pants down and squatting when I’m so high. I feel like my whole body is numb, and my legs tingle, almost like they are asleep. So I decide not to pee—to wait it out. Besides, I’m wearing pants, and, knowing me, I’ll probably get piss all over them. I don’t wear jeans that often, mostly skirts, so I’m not skilled in those ways. It’s hard being a girl.

I walk back to Jimmy, and he’s staring at the joint in his hand, extinguished now, looking like he’s really concentrating. I stop a few feet away from him, nervous that I may scare him or something if I get too close.

“Jimmy, you’re so stoned.”

“Good weed.”

I look up at the break in the trees, and I can see some clouds blowing through the light Central Florida breeze. It’s November now, so it’s getting to be real nice outside, like in the 70s. Sometimes I even need a sweater. I get cold easily.

“Come here,” Jimmy says and motions for me to get closer. I do, and he starts pulling me over the log he’s sitting on, so I’m half on the log and half on him. He kisses me for several minutes, his warm tongue flailing around in my mouth like some kind of bumble bee. “You wanna go to the library?”

“I’m wearing jeans. It won’t be that easy.”

He looks at me, and I imagine he’s seeing my round face and short, dark hair, whipping through the air on account of the wind. I smile at him, ‘cause I like the way his eyes focus on mine and how he already has crinkles around his mouth like he’s in his thirties or something, rather than seventeen.

“Let’s go get something to eat at my house,” I say and silently pray that my mom’ll be at the grocery store or something when we get there.

Jimmy looks disappointed, but he follows me back through the streets of Stillwater. Jimmy doesn’t have a car, and neither do I (though sometimes I borrow my parents’), so we walk. The roads are light grey, the old color of tar, and full of potholes, and the houses look run-down, paint peeling, their yards scattered with bright toys for absent children. We pass several dogs, mixed breeds, hunting for open garbage cans. They don’t really notice us; wild things never do, but Jimmy notices them and picks up a rock, making like he’s gonna hit one of them.

“Don’t,” I say and snatch the rock out of his hand. I throw it in the opposite direction, like I’m scared Jimmy won’t listen to me, but he just shrugs and moves on. It’s hard enough being a stray dog without anyone trying to throw shit at you.

We get to the beginning of The Groves, my neighborhood. The houses are slightly more upscale than the ones we passed on the way here. The only real difference seems to be that the

kids in my neighborhood actually play outside with their bright toys. Jimmy grabs my hand as if he's claiming ownership. I don't mind much, 'cause everyone and their sister knows that I'm the one who's in charge, and if I want to fuck anyone else I will. We pass all the houses at the beginning of my street. They look unique on the outside, but they really aren't.

"Did you know that each of these houses on this street has a twin?" I ask Jimmy.

"What?"

"Well," I say and point to the Giottis's residence, whose house *looks* like it's made of brick, but actually isn't. Even their driveway is a smooth red to match the fake brick. "That house is my house's twin. It has the *same* exact layout inside as mine."

Jimmy raises his eyebrows with surprise. It doesn't surprise me, but I see why it could surprise Jimmy. When I was younger, the kids in our community would all play together, and we all knew each other. Because of this, I've been in every single house in The Groves. But I see why Jimmy wouldn't understand. His parents live out in the middle of the woods, with the nearest neighbor a couple of miles a way and most likely an anti-social redneck.

"And that one at the top of the street," I say, pointing to the long, blue one with the manicured law. "That's the twin of my old friend Margaret's house."

We stop in front of my house, and I see my mom's car in the driveway, and I wanna postpone seeing her, so I stop Jimmy so that we can smoke a couple of cigarettes and enjoy the air. I can tell Jimmy's thinking hard, 'cause he holds the green lighter in his hands, not even realizing how I need to use it to light my cigarette. Eventually I grab it.

"Do you think that we have a double somewhere?" Jimmy asks. "Like the houses?"

“Maybe.” I imagine my double, on the other side of the globe somewhere, having the same exact experience I’m having right now—just standing outside, smoking, shooting the shit, and wondering why the hell she’s there anyway. And maybe she’s wondering about me, too.

A blur of black comes from the top of my vision. Two bald eagles are circling around the last standing tree on the other street across from my house. The street used to be all woods, but they started building last August, and the new houses look misplaced among the older ones, like a tornado ripped them from their original neighborhood and plopped them down with no thought. I can see the top of the tree from my house. The eagles are always gliding and circling, gliding and circling, like some ancient ritual. I turn my attention to the tree, and it looks like there’s some kind of nest or something. Jimmy looks at the tree, too.

“Let’s go check it out,” I say. “But don’t you go throwing anything at them.”

Jimmy shrugs, so we walk over to the next street. The tree’s so tall and skinny that it really hurts to look up at it when you’re close. It’s white with black spots all over the trunk, and the top’s bare, lacking leaves. It’s a dead tree. I keep thinking that the spots must mean something, like a code to some other kingdom. Maybe a code to our doubles. But that’s probably not true, so I look up at the spot where I saw the nest, and sure enough, it’s there, clear as day, naked to the world.

“Cool,” Jimmy says.

“I’m surprised they didn’t tear this down when they first started building.”

“Well, you can’t. In class they told us it’s against the law to tear down an endangered species home.”

“Like I said: I’m surprised they didn’t tear this down.”

“Would be a shame if they did.”

“I’m also surprised that you paid attention in class.”

We stand there for a while, like two ignorant folks staring at a blimp for the first time. I look around and see some of the owners of the houses on that street, taking a break from mowing the lawn or watering the garden so that they can stare at the eagle’s nest with us. I smile, because it seems Jimmy and I have started a trend. I grab his hand and pull him back, walking away from the scene, leaving the eagles to their nest.

*

After Jimmy, there’s Bobby, and he really likes me, ‘cause I’m probably the prettiest girl in eleventh grade to him. Instead of taking me to the library, Bobby actually takes me to his house, which isn’t far from mine, because his parents are never there. But he has a large Doberman, named Hunter, who scratches and paws at his door while we’re in there doing our business. It annoys me, but I’m not really concentrating on the sex anyhow. I just lie there, staring at the yellowed popcorn ceiling, dreaming about a young Davy Jones and Jimmy. I wonder what Jimmy’s doing right then at that second—probably taking another girl to the library. First he’s feeling her up, which makes me want to laugh ‘cause his new girl is probably not as busty as I am. I imagine Jimmy feeling around up there for a while, asking himself, “Am I doing this right?” ‘cause he doesn’t find anything but two mosquito bites. I imagine the girl not being to handle Jimmy’s size and cringing in pain.

Bobby realizes I’m not into it and sighs. He climbs off me and lies next to me, breathing heavy, feeling his pulse. I turn over. His blonde hair’s wild and dirty, and his chest is smooth and tan, like a construction worker’s.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“What’re you thinkin’ bout?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Well, you should be thinkin’ bout me.”

My face turns hot, ‘cause I realize that yes, that’s what I should be doing. But I’m not. It wouldn’t matter if I concentrated on Bobby anyway—the sex still wouldn’t feel good. Bobby’s as inexperienced as a newborn bunny rabbit.

Hunter starts scratching and whining outside the door. At first his whining starts out as a low grumble, but then it starts getting more manic, until the whole house seems to be echoing the needs and wants of Hunter. I put on my underwear—I already have my skirt on—and I let the dog in. He runs into the room and jumps onto Bobby, putting his forelegs on his stomach and licking his face.

“What the fuck, Hunner?” Bobby says and pushes him off.

I cringe when I hear Bobby pronounce “Hunter” as “Hunner.” That’s the way hicks pronounce that word, and I’m not a hick—I’m Italian. I turn around and face Bobby. Then I kneel down and call Hunter to me, emphasizing the “t” sound. He comes, in no real hurry, and sits, like the most obedient dog in the world. I pet him, and he licks my palm.

“He wants attention, Bobby. You people treat this dog like shit. Look.” I start scratching Hunter’s belly, and he turns over so I can do a more complete job. “See, he’s starving for attention.”

“Whatever, Anna.” Bobby gets up and puts on his boxer shorts and jeans.

“So, you’re done?”

“Done with what?”

“Having sex with me.”

“What does that mean? Does it look like I’m tryin’ to continue?”

“No, I guess I just wanted to make sure, that’s all.”

Bobby sighs and walks out of the room. I follow him, and Hunter follows me. Bobby pours himself a glass of water, not even offering any to me, and drinks it all in one gigantic gulp. He’s shirtless, so I concentrate my attention on his smooth shoulders and arms. Bobby’s tanned just ‘cause he lives in Florida. He’s just a white boy; but I’m Italian, so I’m dark anyway—Sicilian even. But I’m attracted to Bobby’s chest, so I walk over to him and start kissing it. Then I start kissing him. My tongue dances with his, and he puts his hand on my breast. He doesn’t resist me, and even though Bobby’s not great in bed, I wonder if it can be better after a little foreplay, so we return to the bedroom for another go at it.

Afterwards, we go down to the same woods by the library that Jimmy and I usually hang out at. It’s a calm day, but a lot hotter than usual for the end of November, and I find myself sweating by the time Bobby’s lighting up the roach. After a couple of hits, I realize I’m not really stoned.

“This weed’s shit,” I say. “I can’t even feel anything.”

“No shit. Fuckin’ Greg.”

“Is that where you got this shit from?” I feel like hitting Bobby. Everyone knows that Greg has the shit weed—*everyone* knows not to buy from Greg.

“Yeah.”

I start grunting in anger, and then I grab the roach clip and joint out of his hand and throw it real far, back in the woods.

“Why’d you do that?” Bobby screams and runs back into the woods after it.

“Fuck this,” I say to myself and grab a cigarette and light it. The woods are overgrown, harsh, and full of cricket sounds and other bugs that make me shiver even though it must be 90 degrees. Bobby’s far away now, bending over and frantically searching for what’s left of the joint. I sit down on the log, determined to enjoy myself without the luxury of good weed. But just then I hear the leaves crunch. Jimmy’s standing right in front of me, by himself, towering over me like I’m supposed to be scared or something. I just start laughing when I see him, ‘cause he’s alone. Looks like my assumptions about a mosquito-bite-breasted girl are wrong.

“Hi Jimmy,” I say, still giggling. Jimmy’s pupils are quite large, and they stare through me, and I can tell he’s half-looking at me and half-looking at Bobby, ‘cause his head is slightly cocked, and his lips start to tremble. He balls up his fists until they turn white like powder. I can almost feel what he’s feeling—the heart wrenching pang of jealousy, the surge of adrenaline creeping throughout the body, the discouraging image of a girl laughing.

“What’re you doing here?” Jimmy finally asks me.

“Nothing,” I say.

But I can tell Jimmy doesn’t believe me, and he turns to Bobby, who’s back now from fetching his joint. The two glare at each other like lions processing a gazelle. Bobby’s face shows the most fear. Hell, I’d be scared too if I was him. Jimmy’s a big boy, quite intimidating, and he’s Italian—Bobby’s no match for him.

“What’re you doing here?” Jimmy asks Bobby.

“Jimmy, please,” I say.

Bobby tries to mumble something, but Jimmy just turns to look at me, and his features soften. His eyes search me. I can tell I hurt him, but I don’t do anything about it.

“Let’s go,” I tell Jimmy, but Bobby thinks I’m talking to him so he starts following me as I leave. “Not you, Bobby. I mean Jimmy.”

Bobby looks at the ground, but he obeys and goes back to sit on the log. Jimmy follows me out of the woods and onto Divine Avenue.

“What’re you doing with him?” Jimmy asks.

“Nothing. We’re just getting high, that’s all.” My mouth tastes like metal, and it’s dry and hot.

Jimmy doesn’t press the matter any further, so we walk up Divine Avenue, past the lonely bright-colored toys scattered throughout the houses’ yards. We reach the library and sit right outside the entrance, on the cold, concrete benches.

“We *need* to get out of this,” Jimmy says.

“What?” I ask.

“We *need* to get out of this place. This city, this town, this *state*.”

“Yeah, Florida sucks.”

“What’re you gonna do when you graduate?”

“I dunno.”

“I wanna get out of here,” Jimmy says and pauses. “But I have nowhere to go.”

“You don’t *have* to have some place to go. You just go.”

“It’s not that easy.” Jimmy stands up and looks into the library. The automatic door opens, letting a breeze of freezing air out, and then shuts again. Jimmy’s probably thinking about leaving his little brother.

“You’re so gloomy.”

“This is a gloomy state,” Jimmy says, still looking in the library. “You wanna go in?”

I smile. “Sure.”

This time when Jimmy takes me to the engineering section I actually feel something. It feels like a vise tightening around my chest—a dull ache that makes me stop Jimmy and catch my breath. But it’s not for long. I pull him close to me, and my ear gets wet from the condensation coming from his breath. I close my eyes and think of a young Davy Jones.

*

After Bobby there’s Sean, and he’s different, ‘cause he’s not from here at all. He’s from California, and when I think of Sean, I think of bleached blondes, shopping, and sunsets. He has an SUV, ‘cause his parents are a lot wealthier and more refined than anyone else’s. He takes me driving downtown, shows me off. The bright lights of all the clubs and bars make my head dizzy, and I wonder if I could ever make it in a big city. We make fun of the cheap girls walking up and down, wearing practically nothing in the cold December air. But Sean doesn’t really look at these girls, ‘cause he has me, and that’s all he needs.

He likes to take me to the empty parking lot behind Meat World, one of the grocery stores in Stillwater. We put the seats down in the back of his SUV, so it’s kind of like a bed, and, at about two o’clock in the morning, we make out. His kisses are soft and swift, and he only uses one hand to unlatch my bra—an impressive feat for a boy who just turned eighteen. Instead of

immediately having sex, Sean lies next to me and holds me close. I smell his expensive cologne and rub my face on his white cotton shirt.

“Do you have a dog?” I ask him.

“No,” he says and feels the hardness of my nipples over my shirt with his fingertips. “Do you?”

“No. But I want one.”

“What kind would you get if you could?”

“Um, I dunno. I know someone who has a pretty cool Doberman.”

Sean laughs. “You Southern girls and your dogs. Let me tell you. Gets me every time.”

I jump up. Hearing him call me a Southern girl twists my stomach up.

“What did you call me?” I ask him.

Sean smiles, obviously not sensing that he’s done anything wrong. “I said you Southern girls are cute.”

“I am *not* a Southern girl.”

“Sure you are.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, you kinda talk like a Southern girl. And you like big attack dogs. And you live in the South for Chrissake.” Sean’s not smiling anymore.

“For your information, I’m originally from New York,” I say and lift up my shirt to start putting my bra on. “Besides, I’m Italian. I can’t be Southern.”

“Geez, Anna, don’t take it so personally.” He starts trying to prevent me from putting my bra on, but I’m too determined and too fast for him. “What are you doing?”

“Take me home.”

“Just because I called you a Southern girl?”

“It insults my intelligence.”

“Well, it shouldn’t. There’s nothing wrong with being from the South.”

“I’m not a hick.”

“Okay, okay,” Sean says and gently pushes me down. “You’re *not* a Southerner. You’re cute, but you’re in no way, shape, or form from the South.”

I sigh and let him push me back down. We start making out some more, and sooner or later my underwear’s off and his jeans are off, and my mind instinctively goes to thinking about Davy Jones. But then thoughts of Jimmy come up. He’s smiling and pushing me in the tire swing he has in his backyard. We talk about running away together—eloping—and going somewhere that has snow. I could get a full wardrobe consisting of fleece-lined jackets, rubber boots, hats with snowflakes on them, furry mittens, and wool scarves.

After we have sex, Sean and I light up cigarettes and talk about our childhood. He tells me how his ex-girlfriend had to abort their baby. I tell him about Margaret, a girl who drowned in my pool when I was twelve. He tells me how his older brother lives back in Hollywood, some kind of fancy costume director or something. I tell him my hopes of escaping Florida, how I need to get away from this smoldering state.

The next day, I’m supposed to go over Sean’s house, but instead I take advantage of the fact that my mom’s out shopping with her friends, grab a beer from the fridge, the keys to her car, and end up at Jimmy’s house.

When I reach his house, the door is open, and the only thing separating the outside from the inside is a screen with a hole going through it. Through the screen I see Jimmy's father and his stepmother sitting in front of the large TV, watching some kind of freaky foreign film with subtitles. They don't even notice I'm standing at the door, still holding my beer, so I just walk in.

Jimmy's house smells like cat piss and alcohol. Finally his parents notice me and tell me that Jimmy's in his room. I politely thank them and walk down the dark hallway, full of G.I. Joes and other little boys' toys. I've only been to Jimmy's a few times, but each time Jimmy's little brother tried to get me to play with him, but I won't do that, 'cause I can't stand children. I never know how to talk to them without cursing. I feel relieved because I don't see or hear his little brother anywhere.

I come to Jimmy's room, and I see him snort a line of cocaine before I walk in and say, "Hi." He squeezes his nose and sniffs so hard that he makes a grunting noise.

"Do you want some?" he asks me and points to the cocaine.

"I'll smoke some. I hate that nasal drip shit."

There's always something to snort, smoke, or shoot (even though I don't do that shooting stuff) at Jimmy's house. So Jimmy packs me a bowl and sprinkles the white powder on top. I put my beer down, and I inhale, and the world bounces and bounces until I finally exhale all my worries away. We start laughing and pretty soon his father comes in and starts laughing followed by his stepmother and all the cats and we are just sitting there laughing and laughing until forever it seems.

But I feel like walking, so I take Jimmy outside with me, and we run to the tire swing, and Jimmy pushes me until I feel dizzy like I'm going to throw up, but I don't. I just get off the

swing. We roam the woods and chain-smoke cigarettes until we finally run out and decide to start a fire. Jimmy starts gathering dead leaves and sticks, and I start clearing an area of dirt to build our fire on. I wipe my hand on the dirt and rub, so that it'll be real smooth. I keep rubbing the dirt over and over, 'cause I can't seem to get it smooth enough. I rub the dirt and rub and rub and rub. But the dirt is still rough and hard, and my hand is so black and dirty that I don't even realize it's my hand. I get so frustrated with the dirt that I start kicking a tree and screaming and yelling at the top of my lungs. I kick the tree, and thank god I'm so high, or else I would feel the warm ache of my toes being smashed in.

Jimmy runs up behind me and pulls me away from the tree. I start crying and cursing, but he wants to leave. I want to leave, too, so we head on back to the house.

"Do you think I'm a Southern girl?" I ask him as we walk through the dimming woods.

Jimmy laughs. "No."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Someone said I'm a Southern girl."

"How can you be? You're Italian."

I smile, and Jimmy puts his arm around me as we reach the house. We go in, and in front of the TV now is Jimmy's little brother, who doesn't notice us, who just plays with a bright red toy truck, so I sit down on the sofa, next to Jimmy's dad. Jimmy's father's face looks so paralyzed and worn, like it could melt off at any second. His eyes are fixed on the TV, on another foreign movie, a different one from before. A French one. I feel uncomfortable watching the movie, so I examine my legs and mark every spot that contains a hair—meaning I missed it

in shaving. Then Jimmy's father puts his hand on my leg, and I jump up, startled from someone actually touching my skin. Jimmy's so high that he doesn't notice, just keeps watching the TV, but his stepmother looks at me with a strange, unfamiliar face.

"Does anyone have a cigarette?" I ask.

"Sure," Jimmy's dad says and hands me a cigarette. But I can't stand to look at him sitting on the couch that is undoubtedly covered with cat piss and spray. He's watching that goddamn foreign movie like some kind of aristocrat or something. I can't bring myself to extend my arm and take the cigarette out of his hand, so Jimmy grabs it and gives it to me, and I run back to Jimmy's room, 'cause I'm starting to come down, and I can't stand those people.

I find my beer in Jimmy's room, so I finish it off. But swallowing is a foreign gesture to me, and I can't tell if I'm drinking the beer or if it's just sloshing around between my teeth every time I bring the mouth of the bottle up to mine and tilt it.

Pretty soon Jimmy comes in, and he starts kissing me with his rapid tongue. He tries to undress me, but I see that the door is open to his bedroom and tell him about it.

"So?" he says. "No one will come back here."

"But still."

"Yeah, but you asked me why I don't take you to my house. We're here now."

"I don't like it here."

"You wanna go the library?" Jimmy asks me.

I don't at first. I don't even answer. I just look around Jimmy's room at the empty beer bottles, the Pink Floyd posters, the roach clips on his dresser, the laundry lying everywhere, and the tiny little ants that trail Jimmy's desk. Then I come across a picture that Jimmy has sitting on

his desk. It must be the only photograph in Jimmy's room, and it's of me—just my head. My eyes are large, brown, and aware. My face is round, and my mouth is curled up in the usual smile that gets guys every time. My short, dark hair is messy and seems to be flying up in midair. I look at my face sitting there on Jimmy's desk, and I realize, yes, I want to go the library.

We walk out of his house, get into the car, and start driving to the library. But I don't think I'm gonna stop there. I think I'm gonna keep going until I run out of gas or something or I have to pee. I imagine Jimmy and me running away from Stillwater—just driving for days, only stopping to eat, piss, and have sex. Then perhaps we'll end up somewhere, but maybe we won't. Maybe we'll just keep driving forever.

A JOKE THAT ISN'T FUNNY

James's brother was a prick. He moved from adult to adult at their parents' Fourth of July barbecue, bragging about how he was going to open up a fitness center after graduating next year, just one of the many perks of double majoring in business and physical fitness. James found his brother's act disgusting. In between talking to the adults, his brother would come over and tell him about how he had a "razor thin honey with tits the size of Jupiter" waiting for him back at his apartment.

"Why didn't you bring her, then?" James asked him.

"What for?" his brother said. "It's not like she's my girlfriend."

"You're ridiculous."

"No, little brother, you're ridiculous. You keep acting like this and you'll die a virgin."

Of course, this wasn't true. James would go on to lose his virginity in his second year of community college. Still, his brother's statement left James queasy. He wondered if and when sex would ever happen for him.

James's brother continued to circulate around the barbecue. James wanted to look away, but he stared as if his brother were a zit smack dab in the middle of someone's nose. And when the adults talked to James about his plans for college, what he wanted to do with his life, he continued following his brother with his eyes.

James didn't like talking about his future. He didn't know what he wanted to do, and he didn't really care. He had only just graduated from high school. His parents bothered him about college, too. James was living in a small studio apartment that his parents paid for in an effort to

get him to go to the community college down the street.

At the barbecue, he missed his apartment. He liked spending time there, watching the local news and playing *Halo* on his PlayStation. So he left his parents' house before the sun went down, at about the same time as his brother did, still bragging about a girl. But when he got back to his apartment, he felt the need to be around people his own age, the same type of people as him, just as clueless and just as apathetic about the future.

James headed to a party being thrown by some high school acquaintances, but when he arrived, he realized he really didn't know anybody there. Sure he had gone to school with these people for years, and they talked during those in between times—when class was right about to start or in the hallways—but that was all. He grabbed a Miller High Life and staked out a corner in the kitchen, where he could eye all the party guests and look like he was fitting in.

Two hours into the party and only one person had spoken to James: a petite Hispanic-looking girl who had stepped on his toes and mumbled an apology. Quickly though, while James contemplated going home and masturbating into a sock, two girls approached him, both with blonde hair, one with a ponytail and one wearing a pink headband. The ponytail asked him for a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," he said.

"Just smoke with us anyway," she said. "We'll find you a cigarette."

The two girls weren't that pretty. The one with a ponytail had a crooked nose and bright pink gums that seemed to swallow her face whenever she talked. The other was short and slightly chubby, her gangly arms flapping as she moved across the kitchen. But they weren't bad, and James hadn't had any company all night, so he followed them to the screened-in pool area.

The girl with the big gums was Stephie, and the chubby one was Brenda. They had just graduated, too, from a neighboring high school.

The girls finally found cigarettes for the three of them, and underneath the humid sky James smoked for the first time. When he was older, James realized that during this time in his life, he never actually smoked correctly—he didn't inhale. Instead, he just held the hot smoke in his mouth for a few seconds and blew it out. No one told him different, and holding the Marlboro Light that first time made James feel like he was in control of the situation. Sentences and jokes escaped from his lips with perfect delivery and timing.

"What did the cookie say when he went to the hospital?" James said.

"What?" Brenda replied, her lips trembling into a smile.

"I'm feeling 'crumby.'" He paused. "What did the cake say when he went to the hospital?"

Stephie shrugged.

"I have cancer."

Brenda and Stephie laughed at this, and James almost didn't notice Stephie's gums consuming her face, and when another boy, a stranger, piped up, telling the three of them that he didn't get the joke, Brenda and Stephie explained why it was funny.

"You see," Stephie said. "It's funny because you expect a real joke, but it's not really a joke."

The boy shrugged his shoulders, and the three of them laughed.

"Really," Brenda said. "It's a social commentary that makes fun of people who actually tell jokes like that and think they're funny."

“Setting it up by telling a regular joke beforehand really emphasizes this,” James added.

James’s fingers fumbled with the cigarette in his hand as he smiled at the two girls. The boy who didn’t find the joke funny shook his head and mumbled something that included the word “stupid,” but James didn’t care, and the girls didn’t seem to notice. James had never known someone to defend his jokes like that. Even his family didn’t find the cake joke funny. He decided at that moment that he was a smoker—had always been one—he just never realized it.

*

During that summer, they worked as one entity, conquering, in their own threesome ways, different people’s parties, restaurants, movie theaters, miniature golf establishments, anywhere young adults go when they’re unemployed, financially backed by their parents, and time seems to pull back and rush forward all at once.

“This might be what I want to do for the rest of my life,” James said one evening as they strolled down the aisles of Wal-Mart, pointing out the hillbillies and lowlifes as they spotted them. There were many of these types of people in Central Florida, and they only seemed to come out to shop at Wal-Mart at eleven at night or later.

Stephie raised her bony arm and jutted a finger at a middle-aged man dressed in a grey suit and wearing a purple feather boa. The three giggled. “What—you want to make fun of other people’s flaws in an attempt to make you feel better about yourself?” she said.

“Or do you want to save these people from their inevitable fates?” Brenda said.

“No,” James said. “I mean just this. Never getting a job and screwing around.”

“Let me know how *that* goes,” Stephie said. She stopped in the middle of the make-up aisle and picked up a blood-red lipstick labeled “Tester” and applied it to her lips. “How do I

look?”

She looked like a blood-sucking ghost. Brenda laughed and said, “You’re going to get herpes or gonorrhea or something like that using those tester lipsticks.”

“You can’t get gonorrhea on your mouth,” Stephie said.

“You would know,” Brenda replied.

“I read it somewhere.”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, really.” Stephie laughed. “Whatever, don’t believe me.”

Over the last month James had encountered several of these times that made him aware of being the only male in the group. He didn’t care about lipstick or perfume or bras, and when Stephie and Brenda stopped to examine these or talked about them, James looked around nervously, wondering what people were thinking of him. He couldn’t contribute to these conversations, because he had never even really seen a bra or bought perfume for a girl, not even for his mother. He would much rather spend time in the comic book or video game section. But these times were fleeting, and instead of walking away and doing his own thing, James clung to the girls like a starving baby to a nipple. They were his only real friends, so feeling like an outsider for a few moments was worth it to him. Besides, he believed he could pull them back into the unisex world at any point.

*

Most often, though, James felt conscious of his Y chromosome when the three of them would hang around his apartment. It was a typical bachelor pad: undecorated walls that were white and blinding, a refrigerator that contained condiments but no food, and furniture that didn’t

match, all purchased from Goodwill or found on the side of the road. The studio apartment was awkward, because James's bed was right next to the couch and television. Anyone could see where he slept and masturbated. He never bothered to clean up, so his clothes were usually scattered around the house, and dark circles from sweating glasses and cans decorated the tops of his counters and coffee table. His bathroom was infested with mold and pubic hair, which seemed to be Brenda and Stephie's favorite messes, because they always pointed this out to him when they came over, which was often because he was the only one who didn't live with his parents.

The three of them never really did much at James's house except drink alcohol that James's older brother bought for them. Occasionally James would start playing *Halo*, and for the first fifteen minutes the girls would watch him play, hiding their disgust for video games. James knew they hated video games, though. He could see, out of the corner of his eye, their faces, their tongues hanging out, eyes scrunched up in revolt—they mocked his video game skills, yet he still played them. He usually only played for thirty minutes, though, just enough to give him some sort of pre-girl normality while still paying attention to the girls at the same time.

"You really want merlot?" James's brother had asked him in the car as they went for an alcohol run. "What's wrong with drinking beer like a man?"

"Well," James said, "Brenda and Stephie want wine. I'm fine with drinking wine."

"Are you screwing one of them yet?"

"We're just friends." James stared out of the car window and shivered from the strange sensation that it wasn't the car that was moving, but the scenery, the trees and subdivisions that characterized the landscape. The world was whizzing by, and he was sitting next to his brother,

the prick.

“Whatever,” James’s brother said. “It seems like you should be getting at least *something* in return for providing them with wine and a place to drink at.”

James was sick of his brother’s views of sex. Sure James thought about sex. A lot. But he never felt an urge to just have sex with a girl. He wanted to find someone to have fun with, joke around with, and then, eventually, have sex with. But James’s brother had always been into having sex with girls rather than getting to know them, and he would never join James and the girls at the apartment for a drink, his excuse always being that there were other girls out there that needed him, if only just for his lust.

“They’re funny girls,” James said. “They laugh at my jokes.”

“Oh no. Don’t tell me you told them that stupid cake joke.”

“They thought it was funny.”

“It’s not funny. Why would someone know they had cancer before they went to the hospital? It’d be more believable if the cake broke his leg or something.”

James’s brother pulled into a parking spot and sighed. A guy and a girl got out of the SUV parked next to them, and James watched them from the side mirror. The girl grabbed out in mid-air as the guy took her hand in his.

“It’s a cake going to the hospital for chrissakes. Cakes don’t go to the hospital—for cancer, for a broken leg, for anything—so if that’s why you don’t find it funny, then there’s something wrong with you,” James said.

“Well, maybe one of them will fuck you one day.” James’s brother left the car running as he opened the door and left to buy some merlot.

At James's apartment, the girls wanted to play drinking games and talk about how they were leaving for college in August, Brenda going to Louisiana and Stephie going to Texas. They loved to speculate about the adventures they would have in college and the cute boys they would most likely meet. One evening, after drinking two whole bottles of wine, the three ended up watching the local news. They each took turns making fun of the news reports. The highlights included a man bitten by a rattlesnake and a coral snake, one after the other, in the span of several minutes, when he was taking his trash out to the curb.

"Why me?" the bitten man said to the reporter as he lounged in his hospital bed. He looked like a normal person, not someone just bitten by venomous snakes. "I have to ask—what makes me so special?"

The dramatics of the report reached a high when the man hypothesized that he must be giving out some sort of pheromone that attracts snakes.

"I think I might be emitting some sort of pheromone right now," Stephie said. "One that attracts stupid news reports."

Among the laughter produced by the local news, Brenda and Stephie, drunk with wine, started inching towards each other until Brenda's soft, blonde hair mingled with Stephie's dirty blonde, and they began French kissing on James's couch.

The moment sucked the air out of James as his eyes focused in, like he was watching a movie. He lingered on the gentle sucking on Stephie's lower lip by Brenda, the brief moment when Stephie's breast grazed Brenda's, the way Brenda's hand cupped the side of Stephie's face, as if she was trying to hold water in her hands. The girls' faces and hair blended into his tan couch, and the low murmur of a news report about a Taco Bell robbery floated across the

apartment. Although James would later believe that the kiss lasted for about seven minutes, it actually only lasted twenty seconds—a tiny lapse in the grandiosity of things.

Just before it was over, James thought that his brother would never believe such a story.

After they stopped kissing each other, Brenda and Stephie leaned back into the couch, giggling and sipping what was left of the red wine. The three of them sat in silence. The soft hair on Stephie's arms tickled James's elbow, and he had the urge to touch it, but he didn't want the moment to end. Finally, Stephie spoke.

"Well, that was awkward."

"Yeah," Brenda added. "I always wondered what it would be like to kiss a girl."

The girls laughed, but James didn't say anything. He barely knew what it was like to kiss a girl, though he had kissed a few, as dares in middle school or during a drunken stupor at a high school party. He was trying to think of unattractive images and feelings to get the hardness in his pants to subside: dead puppies, grandmother kisses, the quadratic equation. But the image of the two girls kissing was etched into his brain like a tattoo. His sexuality and lust rose beneath his pants, an albatross flapping in the wind.

What James wanted to say, though, was that the experience left him feeling holy and significant. He wanted to join in on their kisses, he wanted to run his fingers over their warm bodies, he wanted the three of them to be locked in an embrace. Forever. This was exactly what he was trying to tell them in Wal-Mart. He wanted them to be his life, mainly because he felt he had no other life, only a life with them. Every other experience he had prior felt as if it was building up to this point. In fact, this particular moment would rattle in James's mind for the rest of his life, ranking up there with the eventual birth of his first child and the time he saw a lion

during a safari in Kenya.

James couldn't deny the echo of his brother's voice in his head. He fell in love with Stephie and Brenda both. And when they sobered enough to leave his apartment and drive home, like they always did, he crawled onto his bed, which was covered only by a single sheet, masturbated into a sock, and, for the first time (though not the last), dreamed about their blonde hair mixed in with his black.

*

Over the next couple of weeks, James purposely led Stephie and Brenda down the girly aisles at Wal-Mart, watching them spray each other with perfume that stung his nostrils and ended up making them reek for the rest of the day and night. In the evenings, when they would hang out together, either at a restaurant or a party or the bowling alley, he would lean into them, taking in this smell, and the pride would surge through him as he thought, *I did this*.

James didn't cherish Stephie more than Brenda or vice-versa. He appreciated the both of them, like two parts of a whole. The qualities that James saw in the girls the first night he had met them had now reversed themselves. Stephie's nose added character to her thin face, and her gums were healthy and clean. Brenda's extra weight translated into more skin for James to think about caressing.

"Let's share a slice of chocolate cake," Brenda said one evening at Tommy's Diner. They had just finished eating their hamburgers, and even though James's stomach was full of food, he agreed.

"Can we get cheesecake instead?" Stephie asked. "I don't really like chocolate."

"That's silly," Brenda said. "Everyone likes chocolate."

“I don’t.”

“Did you guys know that the same chemical that experts believe is responsible for the feeling of love is actually found in chocolate?” James said.

“Makes sense to me,” Brenda said.

“Oh no,” Stephie said, her lips pouty and pink.

“What?” Brenda asked.

“Does that mean that since I don’t like chocolate, I’ll never fall in love?”

The three stared at each other for a few seconds before Brenda made her decision.

“I don’t think so,” she said, patting Stephie’s arm.

“What is love anyway,” James said, “except for a chemical reaction?”

“It’s true then,” Stephie said. “I’ll never fall in love.”

James didn’t believe her. He knew that Stephie could fall in love, just as he had fallen for the two of them. And he was sure that Stephie and Brenda loved him, too. The love he felt didn’t feel like a chemical reaction at all. This love was more spiritual. A chemical reaction involved two different elements combining to make something completely different. A tangible reaction. When James was around the girls, he felt as if he would float away at any second. And when he thought of them leaving in less than a month, his stomach wrenched in terror and sadness. He definitely wasn’t something completely different; instead, he felt as if this had always been inside him, just never fully nourished. He had fantasies of moving to a halfway point—a place between Brenda’s and Stephie’s colleges, a place where either girl could visit him, and then they could go visit the other girl together. He couldn’t stand that they would soon be apart.

Sitting at the restaurant and watching Stephie feel sorry for herself made James want to

take her into his arms and let her weep. Instead, James told the girls that he could be wrong about the chemical reaction.

“We’ll get cheesecake then,” Brenda said and waved the waitress over to put in the order.

*

The next time it happened, the three of them only drank one bottle of wine, and James learned a small lesson: The second time a person does something is much easier than the first.

“I just don’t think I’ll find anyone like you guys when I go away to college,” Brenda said, her frown forming tiny wrinkles around the corners of her mouth.

Stephie and James put their arms around Brenda, and that’s when the girls started kissing. This time, though, James was closer to them. He felt the anxious hums in their warm bodies, and his face was so close to their faces that he was sure that they could feel his week-old stubble.

His erection pressed against his jeans and into Brenda’s side as the girls turned to him and, to his shock, started kissing him, their four lips smoothed against his two. James, the eagerness tumbling inside him like a tsunami, circled their waists until he found his right hand cupping Stephie’s breast.

At that moment, James only allowed himself to have that one breast, Stephie’s right breast. He was too nervous to go for anything more. He feared that any other lurches into foreign territory would cause the making out to stop and burst the energy that surrounded the three of them.

This was the second time he had felt a girl’s breast, the first being in junior high when Lorrie Gordon let him feel her breasts through her sweater if he showed her his penis. The moment with Lorrie had left James feeling unsatisfied. He thought it was unfair that Lorrie got to

see bare skin and he merely got to fondle a sweater.

This time it was different. Stephie was wearing a tight t-shirt, and he enjoyed feeling the area where her bra met her skin, a tiny bump of flesh that promised more.

After a couple of minutes, James's hands grew greedy, and he went under Stephie's shirt and rested his other hand on the bare skin of Brenda's back.

"I'm drunk," Stephie said through the kissing and feeling.

"Me too," Brenda said, never taking her lips off James's.

The ache in James's jeans caused him to press against the girls. His thoughts buzzed in his mind as he realized that his dream was coming true. How could the girls *not* love him? Here they were, surrounding him, letting him grope their skin, letting him into their lives like perhaps no other boy. And if the girls did have boyfriends and sexual encounters before, none of those boys were in love with Stephie and Brenda like James was convinced that he was in love with them. He was the only one who could appreciate their entirety.

"I love you," James said, a whisper through the girls' mouths.

Stephie and Brenda pulled back and looked at him. Their faces were unfamiliar—long and accentuated by squinty eyes and tight-lipped mouths. James saw fear, too, as the colors drained from their cheeks.

"Me?" Stephie asked.

James shifted his position so the girls didn't see his erection, his proof that he was different than them.

"Yeah," he said. "I love the both of you."

"That's not funny," Brenda said.

“It’s not supposed to be.”

“You can’t love us,” Stephie said. “You can’t love the *both* of us.”

“I can. Don’t you love me, too?”

James’s heels dug into the carpet as he waited for the girls to answer him. He felt like he was going to be glued to the floor forever once he saw the answer in their pale faces.

“I don’t love you like that,” Brenda said.

James’s lust and love swelled inside him like two canaries fluttering in their cage. Thoughts of Lorrie Gordon’s sweater breast rose inside of him, and his frustration curled against his muscles. He wished he could just shut up there, shut up with that, so that he didn’t say anything else that would give away his vulnerability. But James had never felt anything like this before. He also had never been so horny in his life, not even the first time he found his father’s porno videos in the seventh grade.

“Then why are you making out with me?” James asked.

“I don’t know,” Stephie said and looked at Brenda. It looked as if their minds were connected in ways that James could never know. Not just because he was a guy, but also because he was just a person—not a supernatural being or angel or mystic, like he thought the girls could be. “We’re drunk.”

“Well, I can’t just turn it off and on, like a switch, like you two can.”

Brenda got up from the couch and faced James and Stephie.

“We’re just drunk. These things happen. Making out happens,” she said.

“How many times has it happened with other people before?”

“Maybe we should go,” Stephie said and stood up next to Brenda. The two girls looked as

if they were a fortress.

“No,” James said. “Don’t go. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

But the girls didn’t say anything back to him. They looked at each other, their eyes matching, heavy and knowing, and they kept that same look as they walked out, leaving him and the apartment empty.

After ten minutes of sitting on the couch, in shock and hoping that the girls would change their minds and come back, James gathered the empty bottle of wine and threw it away. He put the glasses in the dishwasher, turned off all the lights, and went back to the couch, where he fell asleep, his head clouded with empty dreams.

*

The three hung out together several times before Stephie and Brenda left for college, but none of them mentioned what had happened, and they never came back to James’s apartment. Their conversations were usual, though. They commented on the weather and sports; the girls talked about their future dorm lives with increasing repetition. James wanted to be near them, clinging on to the times before the incident, but he suspected that the girls only hung out with him because they pitied him, pitied his lack of future plans, his way into adulthood, his naïveté.

He also figured that the girls talked about him and what had happened to each other, in private. They seemed to become more and more interested in what the other said, leaving James a spectator. He felt like he was watching a foreign movie with no English subtitles. On the night before they left, James tried out a new joke on them.

“What’s blue and smells like red paint?” James asked.

“What?” Stephie said.

“Blue paint.”

The girls smiled, Stephie’s gums creeping in and Brenda’s chin jiggling. Their usual laughter was replaced by polite smiles and empty shrugs. James felt like stabbing his eyes out. Instead, he went home, drank a whole bottle of red wine by himself, and fell asleep playing *Halo*.

In August, the girls were gone, and James started community college. Over the next several years, he saw Stephie and Brenda a few times when they came back to visit for breaks and holidays, but nothing was ever the same, and no one ever mentioned what had happened. James never talked about it to his brother or anyone else either. The three grew older until one day James realized he didn’t know them anymore and he never would again.

Still, there were times at night, even well into his last years, that he thought of that night with the news report, that man bitten by two venomous snakes, before things became tainted. And on those nights when he thought about the pheromones, he would crawl into his bed before his girlfriend or wife would, masturbate into a sock, and fall asleep, dreaming about nothing significant.

THE MAN WHO PUNCHED A LION

Sometime during the late 1960s my dad punched a lion. He doesn't particularly enjoy the story, but I do, so I lure him into telling it whenever company comes over.

I don't remember the first time I heard the lion story. It could have been ten years ago—it could have been five. But I do remember one telling of it during a Christmas Eve, when a few of my friends and coworkers came over to celebrate the holidays and, more importantly, eat my parents' Italian food. The dinner table is sometimes a sacred place for my family. Our Italian heritage may dictate that. Food brings people together and provides a conduit for conversation—for storytelling. Place any combination of people around a table with food on it, away from television and other distractions, and you'll most likely get *some* interesting conversation out of it. And so it is with my family.

"Why don't you tell everyone how you punched a lion?" I asked my dad once the conversation dwindled enough to cause an awkward silence or two. I always count on the lion story to bring back conversation.

The people seated around the table laughed, their eyes focusing on my dad, ready to hear the story. My father smiled and laughed, muttering "oh no" under his breath.

"What do you mean you punched a lion?" one of the guests asked.

"He used to work at the Staten Island Zoo," my mom answered. "With the big cats."

My dad, reluctant to tell the story and be the center of attention, shook his head.

"If you don't tell it, I will," I said.

"It's not a big deal," my dad said. The whole room was silent as my dad sighed and gave in to the telling of the story. "When I was cleaning the lion cages, I forgot to close the door.

After cleaning one half of the cage, I turned around and there were the lions—the male resting on the female. I was face-to-face with the female. My first instinct was to punch them, so I did, and they fell back into the cage. I closed the door, and all I remember was that the male came up and licked my hand. That’s when my legs collapsed underneath me.”

That’s how my dad sums up his experience, but questions always arise after he tells it. They want to know details, but my dad usually just leaves it simple: While working at the zoo, he punched a lion.

I imagine my dad working at the zoo that day, the New York summer heat beating down on his head, penetrating through the curly hair that he would eventually lose. I see him cleaning the cages, meticulously, in a standardized way—as all zoo employees who work with dangerous animals do. I feel him get nervous about wanting to do a good job, and I also feel the surge of adrenaline as he rounds the corner and looks up into the menacing eyes of the lioness, her powerful paws on the iron railing where visitors would be if the zoo had any at that moment. Nothing separates my dad’s body from the lions’ bodies, and I imagine he is so close that he smells their raw breaths and feels their whiskers prick his nose.

I wondered if the people seated around the dinner table that Christmas Eve imagined these things, too, or if they just saw my father as strangers do: just another man, worn from experience and life.

I told my father that I was going to write a story about him, about that time he punched a lion, and he was silent. We were, of course, eating dinner, and my father just continued cutting his steak and chewing his tomatoes dripped in mayonnaise, a familiar, wet chomping noise escaping from his mouth. He didn’t even look up from his food.

“How does it make you feel?” I asked him.

“I don’t feel anything,” he said, finally looking at me. “What am I supposed to feel?”

When I was growing up, the only emotion I thought my father felt was anger. It seemed to be the only thing my mother, brother, and I could get out of him. Every day, it felt like, he screamed at my mother about some inconsequential task or issue (and he still does to this day). Perhaps my mother bought bottled water at the store. Or maybe she left the clothes in the dryer long enough for them to develop wrinkles. These issues, small and insignificant to the rest of us, were always big deals to my father, or at least he made them out to be that way. My father ruled the house, his family always hoping to avoid the next fight, the next catastrophe, the next blow up. He always seemed to be angry with us. Always.

At least that’s what I thought until I graduated high school and moved from Oviedo, Florida, to Littleton, Colorado, more than 1,800 miles away. I did this three days after I graduated high school, on May 30. I was seventeen. On June 1, it snowed—airy, refreshing flakes that melted a couple of hours later. It is my first memory of snow, although I had spent the first four years of my life in New York.

After living in Littleton, a suburb of Denver, for five or six months, I started to feel more like an adult, more independent, although I still talked to my parents at least four times a week. The conversations with my mom started focusing more on how my father’s grumpy attitude was really getting on her nerves. Finally, having enough of my father’s temper tantrums, she packed up some clothes and left, not telling my father, my brother, anyone, even me, that she was leaving or where she was going.

My mother left, and my father called me up. I answered the telephone in my junk-filled

three-bedroom townhouse in Colorado, which was inhabited by three boys and me. It was the first time I had ever heard him cry, as I stood in the living room that smelled like sweat and stale smoke, a living room that wasn't truly my own, his voice shaky and soft on the other end of the line. It was the first time I realized my father had an emotion other than anger.

My mom came back a week later, and my parents have been together ever since, but now as I sat across the dinner table from him, listening to him pretend that he felt no emotion about the fact that I was going to write about him, I felt betrayed in a way. Where was my father, the person, in all of this?

"I don't know why you don't like the story about the lion," I told him. "If I had punched a lion, I would tell everyone about it. I would be like, 'Hi, my name is Maria. It's nice to meet you. One time I punched a lion.'"

"It's because I made a mistake," my father said.

"So, you're ashamed of it?"

"Well, I'm not proud."

My father was ashamed of something he did so long ago, yet this something is an experience I always think about, my conversation starter, something that I am proud of, and I make him tell this story to almost everyone that we see. I make him relive his shame at least once a year. And he has kept silent all these years, never truly revealing to me *why* he doesn't like the lion story.

I like the stories my father has to tell, not only because they're interesting and provide some kind of window into his world, but also because one day my father will be gone. Perhaps a lot sooner than I want to admit. And when he dies, he will take with him all of the stories he

never got to tell us. I don't want that to happen. I want to know these stories.

"Everybody makes mistakes," I told him, finishing my dinner. At sixty-seven years old, didn't my father know that?

Later I overheard him talking to my mother.

"I'm going to be famous," he said. "Famous again." Not that he ever was famous, but my father likes to be dramatic in a funny way. We share that sense of humor, a bond unable to be broken. But maybe in him somewhere, he really isn't ashamed of the lion incident. It could be that every time I make him tell the story he feels like he's famous, even if it's only in his daughter's eyes. There is admiration there; he must see it.

"What are you talking about?" my mother asked.

"She's going to write about me, and people will want to meet with me and ask me questions."

"Really?"

"No." My dad laughed. "Imagine—the man who defeated a lion with his bare hands."

"Or the man who punched a lion—"

"And lived to tell the tale."

My father did live to tell the tale, and he lived through many other hardships. In 1942 in Manhattan, New York, he was born to a father who immigrated to the United States from Italy and a first-generation Italian-American mother. My grandfather's family came here in the 1920s, during a time when most people were scared of newcomers. Our surname, Milazzo, is a city in Sicily. I still don't know if this is my "real" last name or if it was given to my grandfather's family when they moved here because their "real" last name was too hard to pronounce or spell.

My father was an only child, a rarity in Italian families. Recently my mother told me that my father's father didn't like children. I'm not sure if this is why my father was an only child, but our family still moved to Florida in 1984 to be closer to my grandfather who had moved there a few years earlier, my grandmother having died years before I was born.

In the 1960s, my father joined the Army, but instead of being stationed in Vietnam, he was stationed in Germany, where he and his fellow soldiers drank warm beer and celebrated their drunkenness on the Autobahn.

While going through basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, my father fell ill. Out of 242 basic trainees, exactly half of them came down with a flu-like illness that had them in the hospital for about a week.

"An upper respiratory disease," my father told me. "We all had it. But I think the Army was experimenting with us. I mean, what's the chance that we all got sick at the same time?"

At the infirmary, my dad's physique shrank to a mere 110 pounds, a skinny mess. He also started losing his hair. He was in his early twenties.

"I always had a lot of hair before that," he said.

In 1972, seven years after my father was discharged from the Army, my dad started to develop symptoms, such as dizziness, weakness, and nausea, that caused him to be hospitalized off and on for several years. During his hospital stay, the doctors performed two painful and horrific procedures. The first one was a pneumoencephalogram (PEG), in which spinal fluid is drained from the brain and replaced by air in order to produce a clear x-ray of the brain. The second one involved pumping dye into my dad's brain while sending shocks throughout his body. After these tests, the doctors diagnosed my father with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Doctors

basically abandoned the PEG procedure in the 1980s because it was so painful, and the recovery from it took months. My father says that when they performed the second procedure on him, the doctor took the needle out of his arm, and blood shot out, covering the ceiling and walls and causing the doctor to apply the pressure of his entire body on my father's arm in order to stop the bleeding. For weeks my father's entire right arm was purple and black, bruised from the procedure.

Unlike my father's incident with the lion, I hesitate to imagine him going through such an ordeal. I don't want to think of my father as vulnerable or able to be broken in any way. But aside from his several MS episodes, my father never developed serious symptoms, and he has not had to go back to the doctor for MS since the 1970s. Doctors didn't know much about MS during that time, so it's possible that his diagnosis was wrong. Because he was diagnosed with it within a certain time, however, he became a disabled veteran and has since received a monthly check from the government.

My parents have another theory, though. They believe that he was given disability because of the "experiments" the Army conducted on my father at Fort Dix. I don't think my parents are crazy for believing that the government mistreated him and other soldiers. But my father does feel guilty about receiving money from the government. He is not truly disabled; there are people who actually *need* help, yet they get none. This reinforces my father's notion that the United States government treats its soldiers and citizens poorly.

In actuality, my father was working at the Staten Island Zoo when he developed his MS-like symptoms. He admits that his illness from that period may have also stemmed from working closely with birds, animals that carry all kinds of diseases. And it was while working at the zoo

that my father punched a lion, a broad statement of masculinity. An act of violence and strength. More than that, though, my father's specific reason for punching a lion that day didn't come from anger or frustration; my dad punched a lion because he was frightened and shocked. Emotions that I thought my father didn't have almost eleven years ago.

I struggle with dealing with my parents' mortality daily. At twenty-nine years old, I'm the baby of the family—my half brother and half sister are in their late 40s. My brother is thirty-three. My mom is sixty-five, and my dad is sixty-seven.

Part of my struggle stems from the fact that I live with them, since I have no "real" job and am just starting my graduate degree. I watch my parents shuttle back and forth to doctors' offices for visits to the cardiologist, the general practitioner, the lung specialist. An entire drawer in our kitchen is dedicated to the dozens of prescription pills my parents take each day in order to keep their bodies healthy and functioning. I wonder if this is the main reason why people move out—not because they crave independence or cannot get along with their parents—but because they can't stand the reminder of what is yet to come.

"What do you want for supper?" my dad always asks. "I don't know what to cook because I'm not feeling good today."

He never seems to "feel good." Meanwhile, my mother suffers from monthly attacks caused by shingles. These attacks leave her in bed for days at a time, her nerves pulsating with waves of pain, her hand constantly clutching at the comforter or on her back. She won't take her pain pills because they make her vomit.

And yet my parents can never relax. My father retired years ago after working for the post office, and they misinformed him of his benefits, so he doesn't have the retirement check he

thought he would. My mother stills works full-time most of the year in customer service for a company that stages beauty industry events. My father tries to find antiques at garage sales and on eBay to sell at a local antique store where he rents a booth. And although my dad is passionate about antiques, the process still forces him to lift heavy objects. He also works at the store once a week, spending eight hours on his feet, which are worn out and almost crippled from his days working at the post office.

They will die soon is a common thought I have in my head because of all these factors, because they don't take it easy, because they are already in poor health. Pressure to start a family of my own so that I'm not alone in ten years has caused me emotional and physical pain. I frequently get headaches, clench my teeth together in anxiety, and suffer from daily stomach pains. At twenty-nine, I've had gall bladder surgery, two root canals, an endoscopy, a colonoscopy, and numerous MRIs and CAT scans.

When I was twenty-six, I went to the gynecologist for my yearly exam. While the doctor examined me, she decided to be candid.

"You know," she said, "you're approaching thirty. Do you plan on having children?"

"Yes," I said, although I didn't really see myself as approaching thirty when I was still four years away.

"Well," she said, "it's healthier for you and for the baby if you have children *before* you're thirty."

"I have been seeing someone for a couple of years," I said to her, hoping that this would convince her that my life was okay, everything was under control, she just needed to trust me.

"I don't see a ring on your finger," the doctor told me, took off her gloves, and left me

naked on the examining table, the physical exam being over.

She was right. At least that's how I started to think. Many of my friends were married, and most had already begun having children. I seemed like the last single one of the bunch. But I wasn't single; I had a boyfriend. Still, he didn't seem like he was going to propose any time soon.

And he never did. We broke up a year later, and I was left to contemplate how I would ever find someone I could spend the rest of my life with, marry him, and have a baby in less than three years.

I've had to accept the cold fact that I will *not* be having children before I turn thirty. The truth is, before the gynecologist decided to be blunt that day, I had set my own goal for having children at thirty, too. Not only because it *is* healthier for the baby and me, but also because I would like my children to know my parents. I want my mother to give me advice on pregnancy and raising a child. I want them to be around for birthdays and holidays and recitals and other events—I want a close family.

This seems unlikely now, given their ages and failing health. And it's beginning to seem like I will be doing to my children what my parents did to me by having me when they were older—I may be depriving my children of having me around when they are ready to have their own children.

But there are a lot of people who grow up without parents, who lose their parents at a young age, or have abusive parents. I know this, but it still doesn't stop me from thinking about my parents' impending death. I feel selfish and unworthy to be thinking about these issues when many suffer more than I do.

Still, my parents have been through worse. My father survived prostate cancer; my mother had half her lung removed in a cancer scare (it turns out it was a benign tumor). And before I was born, my dad lived through terrifying and painful procedures that doctors performed on him. And he came face-to-face with a lion. A man-eater. Using logic, I could deduce that he should have died dozens and dozens of times before—working with wild animals, drinking and driving in Germany, a crippling illness. But he survived.

When my parents die, when my father dies, his stories will survive—they will survive in me, my friends, and the children I hope to have one day. In an ideal world, I imagine my father sitting around the dinner table, telling my children about that time he punched a lion. The children laugh and beg him for details—and he gives them details, even if they are not exact.

But if it turns out that he's gone before that time, I will tell my children about it. I will tell them about the time my father faced two lions, and because of his instincts, he was able to bounce back from that experience, and he lived long after that, accumulating more stories, stories they will know by heart, stories that I will tell them on the way to school, at the dinner table, while they're in the pool, or at bedtime. And when they ask me how grandpa felt about the story, about that time he was confronted by wild animals, about any story, I will tell them that he was scared, angry, surprised, happy, confused. But no one actually knows how my father felt that day he punched the lion—he may not even know himself. There is, however, one distinct way that I'm sure he felt. He felt like a human being facing his own death. And because of that, he felt alive.

THE RELATIONSHIP DISAPPEARING

It's Friday night, and my boyfriend Jonathan, his roommate, and I drive down crowded University Boulevard, the street that runs perpendicular to the University of Central Florida. The taillights and stoplights blur together, their reds, greens, and yellows reflecting on the pavement and metal. The air pulses with the anticipation of another Friday night—thousands of college students on their way to parties or clubs.

We're three of those college students, following an SUV full of Jonathan's friends to a party. I sit in the front seat while Jonathan drives, trying to ignore the silence of his roommate who stares from the backseat at nothing. Jonathan is twenty-four, five years younger than me. His roommate is twenty-two. The age difference between Jonathan and me is something I've worried about during the five months of our relationship, especially with his younger friends around, and at this particular moment I'm reminded of this gap because we follow the SUV too closely as it switches lanes with seemingly no particular direction.

I grip the side of the passenger door. The roommate's phone rings. He answers, laughs, talks too quickly, his words tumbling over one another into one long, stretched out sentence. I can't really understand him. Jonathan's roommate is always like this, always hyper-intense in conversation, always trying to make a philosophical debate about everything. Jonathan tells me his roommate is like this because he's so creative. His roommate reminds me of a little boy, fascinated by all the new things he learns about the world. I don't find him creative at all.

The roommate's head pops into the front, his curly hair spreading out beneath his grey Ascot cap. He doesn't look at me or talk to me. He never does.

“We’re going to the Vortex Amazing,” he says.

I turn my head away, not wanting either of the boys to see me wince. The Vortex Amazing is a black trailer with neon letters on its side reading, “See Vortex Amazing!” People pay \$2 to enter the trailer and check it out.

I first saw the Vortex Amazing a few months ago, parked outside the bleachers at Crash-A-Rama, a redneck love fest that happens the day after Thanksgiving. Crash-A-Rama consists of crowds of people dressed in camouflage, watching as drivers wreck anything with wheels or anything that can be towed by something with wheels. The crowds crave explosions and destruction.

At the time, my friends and I craved it, too. We watched the orange fire leap out from the clunker cars. The flames seemed to swallow the universe, and we were swallowed with it, becoming, for one brief moment, one with dozens of back-road people. We gasped and laughed and ooh’ed and aah’ed in rhythms and pulsations.

But I didn’t experience the Vortex Amazing while at Crash-A-Rama; instead, my friends and I laughed at it, as if paying to watch cars crash into each other was more civilized and normal. Jonathan was down in Miami visiting his family for Thanksgiving. I wished he was there to laugh with us. I wasn’t sure if the sign was telling me that I had to see the Vortex because it was Amazing, or if I had to see something called the Vortex Amazing. My English degree was showing. I decided then that whenever I would serve Jonathan dinner, I would say, “Eat Dinner Delicious” or when I woke up in the mornings, “Take Shower Refreshing.”

But when Jonathan got back from Thanksgiving break, I didn’t have time to tell him about the Vortex Amazing because he mentioned it first. The black trailer with its looming neon

sign was parked right outside of the university, ready to take advantage of the drunken college students who would surely pay for the attraction. The owners of the Vortex Amazing even purchased searchlights and decided to move locations every night, forcing patrons to go on a hunt for the lights in the sky or check Facebook and Twitter for the locations.

Jonathan wanted to see the Vortex Amazing, and even though I had no interest, I experienced it with him. We went with each other one night, alone, away from his thrill-seeking friends. The Vortex Amazing made me sick. Physically sick. I didn't throw up, but I wanted to. Inside the trailer were colored strobe lights that revolved and circled around as the people walked the length of the trailer. The set-up makes most people feel as if they're spinning around. Techno music, with its fast beats and tinny sounds, blasted through mounted speakers inside the trailer. The effect was dizzying and nauseating. The walk took a whole ten seconds, yet most college students stay in there for a long time, trying to hold out until the effect overcomes them, and they have to leave before they throw up.

This sort of wanting to feel sick baffles me and is something I think of little kids doing on a playground, although at the time I can't recall ever wanting to feel sick, even when I was in elementary school. Crash-A-Rama doesn't make its patrons feel sick; its main excitement isn't physical discomfort. But the Vortex Amazing's purpose is displeasure, a deep displeasure that I guess, due to lack of experience, only children crave.

And now Jonathan and his roommate, both of whom had seen the Vortex Amazing several times (I only went once), want to experience it again.

"Do they know where it is tonight?" Jonathan asks his roommate.

"They know," his roommate says. "Just follow them."

So we continue to follow the SUV as it speeds through intersections and yellow lights. Finally, we turn into a Steak-n-Shake parking lot and down a small side road that looks like it leads to trailers where Crash-A-Rama patrons would live. Certainly the Vortex Amazing *can't* be down here, I think. The SUV stops, and a tall girl with straight black hair jumps out of the front seat. Her clothes cling to her curves, and her lips are shiny. Her legs are so long that they look as if they belong to a stork. She is only twenty years old. I'm wearing an oversized black hoodie and jeans, because it's kind of cold outside. She wears a baby-doll, hipster tunic dress with a belt the size of Montana.

Approaching the driver's side window she lets out a squeal. She's still clinging to her iPhone, perhaps checking the location of the Vortex Amazing. None of Jonathan's friends seem to ever let go of their phones. I remember when we had to use pay phones to call someone if we needed to get directions while we were out. None of Jonathan's friends remember this.

Jonathan's roommate rolls down his window, and he grins, widely and stupidly, like a little kid climbing a tree.

"We can't find it!" she screams at the boys, not really looking at me.

"I thought you knew where it was," Jonathan's roommate says.

"Not really. We're just following the searchlights."

The back and forth motion of the Vortex Amazing's lights see-saw through the sky. They seem close, like we already passed them on our way down this nowhere road, but I don't remember seeing the black trailer anywhere. I hope that this will cause Jonathan's friends to stop looking for the make-shift attraction. I just want to stop flying through the Orlando streets and get somewhere, even though I don't particularly look forward to going to another one of

Jonathan's friends' parties, which actually remind me of larger Vortex Amazings, with the lights out and strobes flashing while a DJ plays thumping music and fifty teenagers and early twenty-somethings bounce in unison in the middle of the living room.

A couple of the boys in the SUV scream something at the girl, and she jumps up and down. "Follow us!" she screams as she gets back into the SUV, and then we're on the streets again, tunneling through traffic. Our car feels like it glides and soars. We make u-turns every couple of minutes and turn into crowded parking lots, but we can't seem to find the Vortex Amazing. I listen to Jonathan and his roommate argue about where to turn, even though they both know we're following someone. Every so often his roommate's phone rings, and he laughs and talks. I just stare at all the lights and cars and try to tune out the night, hoping that eventually we stop, even if it's not amazing at all.

PRODUCT OF THE TIMES

One of the things Jonathan tells me when we meet for our first date at Stardust Video and Coffee is that he loves musicals. He talks about the joys of Stephen Sondheim as the muffled clang of drums from this week's amateur band travels from inside the coffee house to where we sit outside, underneath the dark sky, surrounded by twenty-something hipsters. I love musicals, too, especially ones with Julie Andrews, but I've never met a young guy who would admit to loving musicals. I want to know why—why musicals?

“There's something beautiful about people who can't talk about their true feelings unless they break into song,” he tells me.

His explanation makes me fall in love with him right there and then. The last guy I dated had an IQ of about 74 and wore t-shirts that said, “Aren't you glad that I'm not your child?” and “Hello. My Name Is Trble,” with some of the letters in “Trble” spelled backwards, as if written by a seven-year-old, though he was twenty-nine.

Jonathan is twenty-four, a junior at the University of Central Florida. I'm five years older than him, getting my MFA in Creative Writing at the same university. His youth is what worries me the most when we're sitting outside, the dim lights casting watery movements across his forehead. His hands look young, smooth and untouched. His fingers and fingernails are slender—piano fingers, my mom would say. When he sees me staring, he says he has very large hands. Large feet, too. We laugh.

But he's still young—younger than me, at least. Women are supposed to date older. I should be dating older. I'm at a point in my life when all my friends are married with children or

almost there. I don't have time to wait for someone to catch up to me. I want to get married and have kids. The drive is almost biological—my uterus seems to ache when I see mothers and fathers cradling their babies at the supermarket or pushing a baby carriage in the park.

“So do you make musicals?” I ask Jonathan.

“Nah, but I'm thinking about making one for my final project.”

“What have you made, then?”

“I made one short called ‘Hangman, Hangman, Hangman.’ I wanted to call it ‘Hangman, Hangman, Hangman, Hangman, Hangman,’ but everyone else thought it was too much.”

“I like playing with titles,” I tell him. “One of my short stories is called ‘The Practical Use of the Engineering Section in the Stillwater Public Library.’”

Jonathan laughs. “That's ridiculous.”

“I know.”

Jonathan tells me that “Hangman, Hangman, Hangman” is about a couple of hangman champions talking to a class of elementary school students about their success. The premise of the short film is absurd but in a funny, sweet way. Jonathan also tells me that he loves kids.

I don't really like kids, but I know I want my own and that I'll love my baby, even though other people's children are not cute to me. Six months ago I stopped getting my period. I wasn't pregnant, so the doctor took blood work and concluded that there was nothing wrong with me. But what about pre-pre-menopause? I had asked them. The nurses and doctors didn't take my question seriously. Instead, I went back on birth control to regulate my cycle. The possibility that I may not be able to ever have children scares me.

I used to want to have kids before I turned thirty, but that doesn't seem like a possibility

anymore, so I've settled for thirty-five. When I'm thirty-five, my dad will be seventy-three, and my mother will be seventy-one. I'd like to say they have many more years ahead of them, but I've stopped telling myself those lies. My mother had me when she was thirty-six, and I barely knew my grandparents before they passed away.

I don't tell Jonathan this, of course. Talking about wanting to have children on a first date is a faux pas. But it's normal for a woman in her late twenties to be thinking about starting a family.

I also don't tell Jonathan that his age is a source of discomfort for me. I've been out in the world, had a "real" job for about four years until I was laid off in early 2008 when the publishing company I worked for was bought by another.

Has Jonathan experienced life like a full-fledged adult yet? I guess no, and my suspicions are correct—he eventually tells me that his parents support him in every way. I try to forget about his age. We are alike in so many ways that I find it hard to breathe. He, too, finds it odd that no one in his program smokes cigarettes like he does.

"Jaclyn and I are the only ones who smoke," I say. "What's wrong with these people? I thought creative writers were supposed to be smoking, pill-popping piles of messes."

Months from now I'll joke with Jonathan that we're the perfect pair—if either of us "make it big," the other one will have a great advantage. I find it sexy and exciting that I've found someone who seems to appreciate art and absurdity like me, even though I've only known him for a few minutes.

I'll also joke with my friends, whose boyfriends and husbands are older than them, that I probably won't die alone, because Jonathan's younger than me, and he has a better chance of

being alive when I pass away.

As I sip my beer, I see a mass of curly grey hair bobbing up and down near the milk bush plants, its stems stretched out like green, inflated spaghetti. I know the hair belongs to Jeb, a fifty-something-year-old regular, because I've been going to Stardust for about six years. Like Jonathan and me, Jeb thinks he's an artist and often brings a keyboard to the coffee house when others are scheduled to perform so that he can practice his art outside with an audience. He also believes that since the Earth rotates, in order to be healthy, we must rotate ourselves back. So he's made a wooden, round platform and attached a motor to it. He often sets this platform up in the parking lot of Stardust, gets on it, and spins in circles, healing himself from the wicked turns of the world.

I contemplate telling Jonathan this, but I'm scared Jeb'll hear. Everyone knows Jeb's unpredictable and crazy, a hot kernel ready to pop.

*

Jonathan rents a duplex with another film school student. A couple of weeks after our first date, he takes me there, and of course the house is a mess, and the refrigerator contains nothing but a gallon of milk and condiments. The shelves are stained with brown goo, and I tell myself never to ingest anything that comes from that refrigerator. All the kitchen cabinets and drawers are wide open, as if the inhabitants had to immediately evacuate in the middle of making a sandwich.

At first I hope that the mess is Jonathan's roommate's, but when I see Jonathan's bathroom, the floor is covered in dirty underwear, shirts, and towels. The sink counter is infested with pieces of paper, sticky bits of toothpaste, some hair (probably pubic), and even a girl's hair

tie. His toilet has brown spots splattered against its upper bowl. How can he not be embarrassed?

His room is no different. I can't even tell if he has carpet or tile floors.

"What a mess," I blurt out.

"I haven't gotten around to cleaning," he says with no real conviction.

The walls of his room are plastered with index cards, pieces of paper, old pay stubs, and a photo of what looks like a congresswoman, the ones politicians put on flyers and signs. Scribbled on these pieces of paper and index cards in shaky, skinny handwriting are phrases and notes, stuff like "Welcome to Florida, birthplace of that dog from *Frasier*" and "World's Coolest Stepdad."

I immediately forget the mess when I realize he's like this because he's an artist, always creating, never really off. Surrounding himself in art. I want this power that he has, the power to be able to focus on a project and devote my life to it. I need it, but I'm not sure how to get it. I'm not sure if being an artist means being a slob, but I do think it means creating some kind of disorder and chaos. I'm just too orderly and logical to succumb to this. Maybe Jonathan will show me how to let go, I think later that night as I listen to the soft whistle coming out of his nose.

*

Over the next year, Jonathan and I are inseparable. He makes me believe in love when, after two months of dating, I pull him aside and whisper into his ear with heavy breath, "I love you." He tells me that he loves me, too, and we kiss until I have to pull him away before we forget about all the people at the party and make love on my best friend's bed. We talk about building our lives together, with a family, a dog, a house near Stardust, where the culture of

Orlando meets. I tell him about film contests and screenwriting opportunities; he encourages me to submit as many pieces of fiction as I can for publication.

I feel lost without him, and I suspect he feels the same way, too. At night we talk in bed, sometimes staying awake until four in the morning. He tells me about Batman, how he's a superhero, has a bat cave, fights crime. I laugh so much that I cry. We are silly together, and I never get sick of this silliness, even if I'm unable to get enough sleep to function normally at school the next day.

*

Jonathan and I drive down Colonial, a strip of highway not far from downtown Orlando. The sun is setting, burning everything with an orange glow. On this particular stretch, we pass abandoned businesses, the paint on their storefronts peeling with neglect, windows boarded and dusty.

Jonathan says these places are beautiful. "I just love this area of town. I want to film here."

We've been together for a year, and he's told me this so many times. I stare out the window from the passenger seat and watch the yellow haze drift by, a staleness that I'll never overcome. I've lived in Central Florida for twenty-six years, and I've never liked this area. There's no culture here, just chain restaurants and pawn shops. The roads are flat, and the surrounding shrubbery is a muted ochre and seems to be frozen, not swaying or blowing in the wind.

At first I thought his love of Colonial was sweet and interesting. I always listened to the way he talked about the beauty and how it inspires him to produce and create, and I nodded with an eager mind. I was ready to create with him, to be just as optimistic about a town I've always

hated.

But now I can't even look at him when he goes off on his rants. Beauty is not, *cannot*, be in *everything*. Something has to be ugly and not worth anyone's efforts. This part of town is just ugly. And listening to Jonathan telling me that it's pretty all the time has grown tiresome. It's almost as if he's trying to convince me to like Orlando. I like the mountains, the cold, the dry air. I like eating in local restaurants, not chains. The opposite of Central Florida. I can't make peace here.

Over the last month, Jonathan's grown increasingly agitated by his need to produce and create. He's been obsessed with creating a "fake" movie called *The Fourth Trimester*. This is a film that will never be filmed, but Jonathan has created a website that showcases *The Fourth Trimester* as an actual film. He plans to film footage that shows the movie in production and place this footage on the website. On this site, he has created a director named Lars Garble.

The Fourth Trimester is actually just Jonathan making fun of another film student who made a film about a man's trepidations about having a baby. Jonathan told me that he can't stand these types of played-out plot premises, especially because he wants to have children and doesn't understand the typical guy response of being "tied down." When he says these things, I feel proud to have a boyfriend who challenges the so-called social norms of his gender.

But this project of his, among his recent obsessions with Disney films and rapper Kanye West, has him spending his morning showers talking and muttering to himself, a heated conversation with no one. It's certainly not a conversation with me or with my puppy, Chloë, who's eight months old and hears his shower rants, too, her head tilted and ears perked.

"I don't know how you can like this place," I say to him. "It's because you haven't lived

here for long enough.”

“I don’t know,” he says. “There’s something beautiful in the way this area reflects the times.”

“I don’t care what it does. It’s ugly. The whole city is ugly.”

“There’s beauty in ugly things.”

“Don’t give me that artistic bullshit,” I say to him, although I wish I had a more creative outlook concerning this shitty town.

*

At 12:45 in the morning, Jonathan and I walk out of the largest IMAX theatre at Pointe Orlando. We’ve just seen Part I of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. During the summer I took a graduate children’s literature class that focused on the *Harry Potter* series. That summer we turned off all the lights in my apartment and watched all the existing movies. On my couch, I curled up against Jonathan’s warm body as he experienced these movies for the first time. He loved them, and we anxiously awaited the arrival of the new one.

I tell Jonathan that I think the movie is awesome. Everything’s either awesome or retarded to me. I can’t understand how I’m a writer and my verbal descriptions of events are only one of two words. Nevertheless, the first part of the film ends when the house-elf Dobby dies. I tell Jonathan this is awesome because Dobby’s death is a life-changing moment for Harry, but I don’t want to tell Jonathan why, because he hasn’t read the last book. He hasn’t read any of them.

I light a cigarette. Jonathan hasn’t smoked for months.

He says nothing. His head hangs down. His blue eyes move back and forth, following the

rhythm of his feet. His hands are stuffed in his pockets, and his lips curl as if he smells something rancid.

“So,” I say, “what did *you* think?”

He stutters for a moment, and I can’t understand him. At first I think he didn’t enjoy the movie, and he’s nervous to tell me or can’t find the words to break it to me that something I think is awesome is actually retarded. But I realize he’s trying to communicate the thoughts in his head, and they’re coming out jumbled and fuzzy, like he’s underwater. I figure thoughts run through his head like a herd of galloping horses—fast and loud. I tell myself that this is his artistic nature. Finally I hear something I can understand.

“It was beautiful. Amazing.”

Of course, I think. It’s such a familiar reaction with him that I don’t think anything more of it, but when I glance over at him, I see him start to smile. A rant coming on like a tsunami.

“I mean,” he says, “the director really knew what he was doing, you know. He knew how to frame the shot, how to provide tension.”

We are the only the ones walking down the faux brick streets. Pointe Orlando is a tourist trap, an area filled with shops and restaurants, made to look like a small, quaint village. But villages don’t usually have clothing stores like Armani Exchange and restaurants like Hooters. All of the shops are closed for the evening. Jonathan speeds past them, a whirling dervish. It’s hard for me to keep up, since my legs are much shorter than his.

“And this guy’s only done television shows,” he continues. “It’s like we’re coming into a new era of art. A Cultural Revolution.”

“What?”

“You don’t see it?”

“See what?”

“That this movie is the start of a Cultural Revolution that’s happening all around us. I mean, art forms are moving into a higher plane, and this is all part of it.”

“I guess.”

“Things are changing so fast. I don’t think you see it.”

It’s just a movie, I think. A *Harry Potter* movie, even. I love the *Harry Potter* series, but I’m not sure if it’s the greatest movie of our time. I wonder what Jonathan’s heroes would think if they heard him like this. Maybe Billy Wilder would recast Marilyn Monroe as a house-elf and make *Some Like It Hot at Hogwarts Castle*, or the Coen Brothers would direct *O House-Elf, Where Art Thou?*

“But changes don’t really happen so quickly,” I say. “Changes are gradual. Maybe art is becoming different, but I’m not sure about a revolution.”

“I can’t believe you don’t see it.”

“But people don’t see things like that,” I tell him. “We didn’t *know* the Internet was going to be a Cultural Revolution. No one *knew* that ahead of time. It’s only when you look back you see it.”

“People knew.”

“No,” I say, even though I’m sure some people really did know. “They didn’t. Maybe you just *think* they knew because you’ve always had the Internet. I remember when there was no Internet.”

We turn a corner, and the parking garage towers over us.

“Shit,” Jonathan yells, his frustration echoing across the corridor.

“What?”

“I have to pee. I can’t hold it.”

“Well you don’t have to yell about it.”

He reminds me of Chloë. When she was younger, she used to pee a little bit every time something excited her.

I follow Jonathan back through the deserted tourist trap until he finds a bathroom. As soon as he comes back, he continues to talk about this Cultural Revolution—how disappointed he is that I don’t see it, how people need to become a part of it, how the fate of art rests in this tiny moment.

I’m not sure if I believe in this fate. Who is Jonathan to think that he can tell people what is aesthetically pleasing and what is not? Even though I’m five years older than him, I don’t think I’m experienced enough to be an authority in these matters. And I’ve been writing fiction since I can remember. Jonathan only started filmmaking when he got into college. He reminds me of how I was when I was a teenager, too young and too passionate for myself and my art to worry about anything else other than creating. I really thought that if I was talented enough and worked hard, I could make it as a writer.

But now I’m not too sure. Making a living as an artist is not easy. It’s complicated, and it’s a devotion that takes years to pay off, years that I’m not sure I have. I’ve been so busy this semester with teaching composition that I’m not sure if I’ve been paying attention to writing as much as I should. I’ve been trying to write short stories centered on protagonists who are nothing like me. Recently I wrote a short story about an older man who works at a gun range. I am scared

of guns, and I don't ever want to shoot one. While I was writing it, Jonathan nagged me about shooting a gun to get the feel of it. I questioned myself and almost succumbed to his pleas, because I thought that he was more of an artist than I am, and he knows what's best. But at the end, I maintained that I didn't need to shoot a gun in order to write about shooting a gun.

I don't say much. I don't want to agitate Jonathan any further. He looks like he's going to burst from excitement.

I just want to go home.

"Let's go out. Let's do something," Jonathan says while he drives onto the interstate. The faint glow of downtown Orlando looms in the distance. "We're here. I don't want to go home."

Jonathan's eyes are fixed on the road, but I can tell they want to wander. I become nervous about him driving while so hyped up. I don't want to die amidst this Cultural Revolution.

"I'm too tired," I tell him, but I really just don't want to go out with him in such a manic state.

He sighs. His hands rub the steering wheel. Usually he's the one turning me down about going out and staying at home.

"I just don't want to go home," he says.

*

At Stardust with my friends Jaclyn and Joanne, we sit in the alcove, a little cubby area outside that's built into the wall. Joanne's a nurse and someone we always consult when we have a blister that won't heal or stomach pains. Jaclyn is from my MFA program, and though she is a year younger than Jonathan, I don't feel the same disconnect with her age that I do with my boyfriend. I blame this on the notion that women mature faster than men.

From the alcove we see everyone who comes in, especially the fixed gear bicyclers (bohemian-types who don't believe in having bicycles with brakes) who roll their pant legs up and look like they haven't bathed for days. Joanne's laughing at a couple of them as they ride up when I accidentally say something out loud.

"We haven't had sex in over a month," I say.

Joanne looks at me, her mouth twisted. Jaclyn's eyes widen.

"What?" Joanne says.

"I think it's too long if it's been a week," Jaclyn says.

"Well," I say, "it's hard with Chloë."

But Chloë isn't a young puppy anymore. She's almost nine months.

The girls stare at me. They expect me to confess that Jonathan and I aren't getting along, but it can't be that we don't get along. He tells me that he loves me every time we get off the phone, and I kiss him in his sleep before I go to school. We talk about getting married and having children. We want to build our lives together.

I often talk to my friends about Jonathan's quirks, like his inability to maintain a clean apartment, but I've never before hinted that we weren't having sex. They know this is big; everyone knows this is big. Not having sex is the first sign of a deteriorating relationship.

But we don't have sex because of the dog.

"You know," I continue, "you have to put her in the crate or else she'll be on the bed, and that's just weird."

"I could never have sex in front of a dog," Joanne says.

"Oh, come on," I tell her. "I suppose you're one of those people who don't get naked in

front of their pets either.”

“If I had a pet,” she says, “I don’t think I would get naked in front of it.”

Jaclyn asks if I’m upset that Jonathan and I haven’t had sex recently, and I shrug. I’m just too busy with school and teaching freshmen how to write, I tell them, and Jaclyn understands because she teaches, too, and because they won’t stop staring at me as if my face is mangled, I tell them about the time when a dog I used to have licked my ex-boyfriend’s butt while we were having sex.

*

During the last week of school before winter break, I’m busy grading portfolios. Jonathan’s already out of the house to go to classes when I wake up. I put on some pants and take the dog out.

We walk down to the cemetery behind my apartment complex. I let Chloë off the leash, and she prances around, happy to be out in the mid-morning sun. The heat warms her chocolate fur, and I reward her every time I call out her name, say the command “here,” and she responds. I want her to be an off-leash dog as much as possible.

I didn’t want to live here in Oviedo, five minutes away from the college. Most of my friends live near downtown Orlando, near Stardust, and I used to live there, too, before I got laid off from my previous job and had to move back in with my parents. But I took this apartment because Jonathan told me he was going to move in with me, and he didn’t want to live too far from school.

That was before Jonathan checked his lease agreement and saw that he could not sublease the duplex. Breaking the lease would cost over a thousand dollars, and it would cause his

roommate to have to find another place to live. A month ago I told him that he shouldn't move in because of these issues.

Now I'm stuck here until August, and I can't afford my rent. Jonathan's been giving me \$200 every month since he has all his clothes over here and basically lives here. I buy food, too. Sometimes he buys food.

We get back inside, and Chloë settles down under my feet, tired from our walk. As I grab the portfolios, I notice a flyer on the dining room table. It reads:

For the past decade, subversive & radical properties have been silently dismantling every social norm as we know it; the old means of distribution and communication has been dissolving before our very eyes and it is now the responsibility of the artists to process the meaning of this new-found world. If you have not yet been overcome by the notion that we are currently riding a cresting wave of radical cultural change, then you might already be one of those who will be left behind.

Starting on Friday, you will have 30 days of complete independence to create, develop, and grow. Will you take advantage of this opportunity, or will you wallow in a pathetic bout of death-denial? Do you care about art, or do you care about looking like you care about art?

DO YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE?

These words have Jonathan's stink all over them. It's obvious this flyer is directed at his peers in the film department, peers who Jonathan believes are not spending enough time on creating and producing art. This is not the first time he has made a flyer or pamphlet and posted it for his friends to see so that they can be reminded that they are artists, and it's their duty to

produce and create as much as possible. He recently created a pamphlet in response to his friends not attending his Film Club event because they just had to have a party when they found out the ingredients in the fad alcoholic energy drink Four Loko were going to be reformulated. Jonathan distributed these pamphlets at school and Stardust. To my knowledge, none of his friends noticed.

I read the flyer over and over again, as if I'm attempting to put together a puzzle. Words flash in my mind: social norm, new-found world, cresting wave, death-denial. Is this what he works on when he's too busy to take the dog out or come watch television with me?

I imagine Jonathan poring over each word and phrase in the flyer, placing ----- dashes all over the place, which is what he does when he can't think of the right wording. Will he always be like this? If Jonathan and I were to get married and have a child together, would he shirk his parental responsibilities by locking himself up in the office all day to create art like this? If so, when would I be able to work on my art? Wouldn't our child be a work of art, too? Would he even care?

We've had these conversations before, and of course he always claims that he would never do such a thing. I believe him, too, because he often talks about *when* we have children, not *if* we have children. He might even want children more than me. He likes to tell me how beautiful I'll be when I'm pregnant, and I like to tell him how retarded he is for saying such a silly thing.

And then I think of something worse: In thirty years, Jonathan will have become Jeb from Stardust. It's as if he's creating his own version of a spinning machine by making flyers and posting them. I imagine Jonathan explaining that because the Earth's gravitational forces have zapped all the creativity out of college students and forced them to worship an alcoholic energy

beverage, we must remind them of their true purposes.

When Jonathan gets home from school, I place the flyer in front of him.

“When did you do this?” I ask.

“The other day,” he says. “I’m putting them up at school.”

“So now you’re telling people what to do on their winter break?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Some people haven’t seen their families for months, so if they don’t go home and write the most poignant screenplay of the year, they aren’t artists?”

“This is why I didn’t tell you,” Jonathan says. “You don’t understand.”

“I just think it’s funny,” I say and force a laugh. “Isn’t this what you’re doing? You’re creating all this stuff so that people see that you look like you care about art.”

I don’t know why I’m so annoyed. It’s probably because I haven’t produced much art this semester. Not as much as I should have, anyway.

“It’s a rhetorical tactic,” he says. “It’s supposed to be like that. I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

I imagine standing in front of my Comp I students, Jonathan’s flyer on the doc cam, its words towering over us like a condemnation. Now, I would ask them, why did the author include the phrase “pathetic bout of death-denial”? What exactly is “death-denial”? Who is the audience for this flyer? Do you think that performing these actions, or not performing them, would lock you into a state of death-denial? I could make a pop quiz.

I don’t argue with Jonathan, because he’s right. I should be happy that my boyfriend is creating something and appreciating art. I should be happy that he knows what NPR is, unlike

the Trble ex-boyfriend. The reason I broke up with Trble was because he wasn't very intelligent and didn't seem like he cared about art, let alone creating it. Jonathan's the complete opposite. Maybe he cares *too* much about art and nothing else. I didn't know there was such a thing, and I don't know why I can't find a happy medium.

We've had these conversations before. The "what if" scenarios. What if someone came to you and said you could become a great artist, but you would have to give up your family and friends? Jonathan never gives me a straight answer for this "what if," but I always give mine: I would never give up my family and friends. I'd never give him up. But now it seems as if our values have come to a cresting wave of disparate ideas.

*

A week later the day comes—the one that has been milling around for months, although I don't see it. I'm blinded by work, by grading, by worrying about paying next month's rent, which I can't afford.

Eleven o'clock in the morning. I've had five hours of sleep, but at least I finished grading all the portfolios. Jonathan jumps in the shower, and the dog jumps on the bed, her cold nose wetting the back of my hand. I hear the shower turn on and Jonathan's usual mumbling, arguing.

When he gets out I ask him if he's going to Gainesville. I heard him last night talking about how he was going at six to see a film. In my state of sleepiness, I think this means six in the morning.

"That's not until later," he says.

"I finished grading," I yawn.

Chloë shifts to rest her paw on my leg. She stares at Jonathan as he puts on his deodorant

and shuffles around the room, searching for underwear.

“Hey,” I say, “since I’m done grading, do you want me to go to Gainesville with you?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “You don’t have to.”

But I want to go with him. I’ve finally finished my semester, and I can spend time with him, other than us being in separate rooms, him writing or editing some script and me grading papers. Ever since the start of the semester I’ve been chanting something in my head: I need to make more time to be with Jonathan. But I was so busy teaching and reading and grading and writing that I could never follow through. Now that the semester’s over, I can actually give him the attention he deserves.

“Wait,” I say. “Why didn’t you invite me in the first place?”

I know it wasn’t because he thought I had too much schoolwork to do. I know this, because he never remembers that I have a lot of work. Or maybe he does and just doesn’t see the importance in it.

“Because you don’t like my friends,” he says, too quickly, as if he’s been anticipating this question for days. He doesn’t need a moment to think about it.

“I’m fine with your friends,” I say. “I just don’t like going to big parties with techno music blasting in the background so I can’t hear or talk to anyone.”

“No, you’re not,” he says. “You always act weird around them.”

“Maybe that’s because you guys just talk about obscure directors that I know nothing about,” I say.

He gives me silence.

“Should we just break up then?” I can’t believe I’m bringing this up.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice cracking.

My limbs start shaking. I search his face for an indication that he’s just kidding, he’s just confused, he’s just trying to prove a point or work through this idea. But he peeks at me, and his face is flushed and straight.

“You really think so?” I say. I’m still hoping for a different answer.

“Yeah,” he repeats, in the same tone.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

My eyes are still infested with sleep as I pull the down comforter off me and get off the bed. I grab the nearest object—one of my shoes—and throw it across the room. It bounces off the carpet without any kind of impact. Its landing is unsatisfying. A peak with no crash.

“So you’re just going to gather your stuff and leave?” I ask him.

“Yeah.” Again. The same “yeah.” One that is sure and unsure at the same time.

“Get out,” I yell at him. “Give me your key and get out.”

Ten minutes later he’s gone, and I crouch down on the kitchen floor, tears streaming down my face. Chloë is right next to me. She’s the only thing I have that’s a reflection of myself, a product of whatever I choose to introduce to her. My work of art. I wonder if she is as close as I will ever get to having a child. She tilts her head as I cry and sits next to me, her legs still too big for her growing body.

*

I drive down Colonial. Headlights and traffic signals blind my way. I put on my glasses. I don’t normally wear them, but sometimes I need them for night driving to help reduce the glare.

It's been a week since Jonathan left. I'm making my way to Jaclyn and Nick's house where we'll play board games and smoke cigarettes until one in the morning and I drive back alone and empty, blaring some sad folk song.

I speak all of this into a digital recorder I bought yesterday when I realized I come up with all my good ideas for stories while I'm driving. I jump around in the story, though, as I pass by all those cars on the highway. The events morph into one another until I can barely get anything straight. I talk fast, and when the car stops I wonder if the people next to me can see me rambling to myself. I suddenly wish I were in the shower.

The abandoned businesses occupy the side of the road like a fuzzy memory. Their windows are dark, lifeless. "Everything Must Go" signs flap in the wind, their own swan songs. A product of the times. I, too, am a product of the times—too broke for a one-night stand, too broke for artificial insemination, too broke to start over. Now I'm here, going to see friends, working my way through school. I am these dilapidated buildings, just as beautiful in my own halted progress.

CALCULATING PROBABILITIES

I try to live my life by “don’ts”: don’t talk with my mouth full, don’t talk about bowel movements with strangers, don’t reveal secrets about friends. When I muster up the nerve to talk to Andy at Babbler’s, a karaoke bar, I tell myself I will not do any of these things.

“I really liked your version of ‘No More I Love You’s,’” I tell him, my voice straining to be heard over a man singing Radiohead’s “Creep.”

We both stand at the bar, our arms resting on the backs of the stools. The bartender brings him a bottle of beer and starts making my whiskey and coke.

“Thanks,” Andy says to me, not to the bartender. I can tell he’s talking to me because he’s looking straight at me, his green eyes lighting up in the dim, smoky bar.

I nod, and he turns away, looking at the red-haired, overweight man singing on the stage.

“You don’t think it was too gay?” he asks, turning back towards me. If I had a list of “do’s,” one of them would be “do laugh at his jokes,” but I don’t have a list of “do’s.” I laugh anyway.

“Not at all,” I tell him. “But isn’t the fact that you sang Annie Lennox in the first place make it really gay?”

He laughs. “I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with being gay.”

“No, of course not.”

“I’m just not gay.”

“No, you’re not.”

The bartender brings my whiskey and coke, and I take a sip. The whiskey burns its way down to my stomach.

“My friend Herb is gay, but you’re not.” That’s me breaking the “don’t reveal secrets about your friends” rule. But Herb is openly gay. Maybe I still have something going for me.

Andy laughs. “Herb?”

“I know. He’s thirty-two years old and his name is Herb. *And* he’s gay. His parents must have hated him.”

“My name is Andy,” he says, and I don’t mention that I remember the DJ calling his name before he went up to sing. I don’t tell him that I’ve been hoping to talk to him all evening.

“I’m Leah,” I say, extending my hand for him to shake. He looks at it for a moment, almost like the gesture confuses him, but then he shakes my hand. Everyone can see it, the bartender, the DJ, his friends, my friends, the people playing pool on the other side of the bar. Our five-minute relationship becomes a beautiful accident for everyone to rubberneck.

The red-hair stops singing, the music fades, and Andy and I let go of each other so we can clap. Karaoke etiquette states that you should clap for everyone and anyone who goes up to sing, whether they are bad or good. The red-hair was definitely in the bad category.

“Next up, we have Leah,” the DJ says, and Andy turns to me, clapping and smiling, almost cheering. I smile at him and make my way on stage. When I get up there, I turn to my friends, and I see Carrie’s penciled eyebrows lift and her lips narrow, and I know it’s her silent commentary on my conversation with Andy.

The music starts, and I sing “Linger” by the Cranberries. It’s my default song when I can’t find anything new or more interesting to sing. Each time I hit the notes that I have to hold, I close my eyes and grip the microphone like I’m a star.

After I sing, Andy’s still at the bar, guarding my whiskey and coke. I walk over to him, and I grab it, sucking through the thin, red straws.

“That was great,” Andy says.

“Thanks,” I say. “It was either that or ‘Piano Man.’”

“I think you made the right choice.”

“Me too.”

The DJ calls the next singer up, an older man, with a long, white beard wearing a straw hat. His name is John. He starts singing Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.”

“This is going to be great,” Andy says.

“You’ve never been here before, have you?”

“Nope.”

“Cause he sings this song *every* time he’s here, which is like *every* day of the week.”

“They have karaoke every day of the week?”

I nod, taking another sip of my drink. “Are you from here?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Well, no. I moved to South Florida for seven years after high school, but now I’m back here to go to college.”

That makes Andy about twenty-five years old to my thirty. That’s not a bad age difference. I’m about to ask him what he’s going to school for, but out of the corner of my eye, I notice Carrie approaching, her sleek body gliding over to us.

“Leah,” Carrie says. “Herb wants to ask you something.”

I glance over at Herb, and he waves at me with his ogre-like hands. I look back at Carrie, and she’s trying to flag down the bartender.

“He can’t come here and ask me himself?” I ask.

“I don’t know. He just said he wanted to ask you something.”

Grabbing my drink, I walk away, and I hear Andy say something to Carrie, but I can’t hear the exact words. When I’m back at the table, I sit down and steal a look towards Carrie. I see her and Andy talking. I see Andy laughing.

Guys always like Carrie because she’s pretty, and she reminds them of someone they want to take care of. It’s been that way since we met in middle school. But I’m the funny one, so hearing Andy laugh at her makes me squirm in my seat, makes me think he’s only laughing to get in her pants. I look up at Herb, who’s smiling at me like an idiot.

“So, what did you two talk about?” he asks.

“Barely nothing. I only got like five minutes total with him. Why did you take me away from him?”

“Because I really wanted to ask you something.”

“You couldn’t have come over and asked? You had to send her? You *know* guys drool over her.”

“She was going to get a drink anyway,” Herb says. “What’s his name again?”

“Andy.”

“Andy.” Herb pauses to look over at him. “That’s right.”

“So, what do you want to ask me?”

“Will you come with me to the free clinic tomorrow?”

“Oh,” I say, remembering our earlier conversation. “Of course.”

“I just don’t think I can do it by myself.”

“I might as well get tested while I’m there too.”

“Have you had unprotected sex lately?”

I laugh. “Uh, no. I wish. I haven’t had *any* sex lately. But you never know.”

“Don’t say you wish.”

“So, you couldn’t have waited to ask me that later on?”

“It’s been bothering me.”

Herb had unprotected sex last night with a guy he met off the Internet, and now he’s scared. I told him that if he did get HIV last night, it wouldn’t show up on a test right away, and he knows this, but his brush with disease has scared him enough to get tested anyway. I told him he should get tested every three months, unprotected sex or not. Especially since he’s been having sex with different men from the Internet at least three days of every week for the past ten years. This information shocked me the first time I met Herb, but I soon found out that Herb’s sexual rendezvous are actually the norm for the single, gay men population. I do believe it would be the norm for heterosexual men, too, if women had the same sexual desire as men.

John finishes singing “Thriller,” and the DJ thanks everyone for coming out. It’s one o’clock in the morning, and the bar will close in an hour.

Once the applause dies down, I hear Carrie laugh from across the room, and I pick up my drink and march back over to her and Andy, attempting to break up their conversation, but before I can say anything, Carrie speaks.

“Did you know that Andy is a math major?”

“Great,” I say. Carrie was a math major. She even has her master’s in it. She works as a math professor at the local community college. I work there, too, but I teach literature and comp. Two opposite sides of the spectrum.

It’s not that people who love math cannot like people who love literature or vice-versa, really, but I know from experience that guys who love math are impressed with girls who love math. My ex-boyfriend was an engineer, and when he first met Carrie, I thought he was going to break up with me to try and date her. He talked about her nonstop, his fascination with her passion for numbers and statistics invading my dreams as if him just talking about her like that constituted cheating. Eventually I had to confront him about it, and he stopped talking about her like that. Still, every time they were together, I could see the adoration in his eyes.

“You know, a lot of the professors at your college are my friends and colleagues,” Carrie says. “Have you had classes with Patricia Bunsen?”

“Not yet,” Andy says. “I kind of *just* declared my major.”

“Well, I recommend taking one of her classes as well as one with Greg Schwartz.”

At this point, I feel like a bird that has been run over by a car. But birds don’t need to walk on the ground. For a moment, I think to ask Carrie if she would do some research and calculate the statistics concerning bird hit-and-runs. I would bet ten dollars that most of the birds that are run over are injured or just mentally retarded. But I decide against asking her this and let her continue. I just smile and walk back to Herb.

“He’s a math major,” I tell him.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, honey.”

“It’s okay. I think I’m used to it.”

Herb covers my tab as payment for driving him to the free clinic tomorrow, and we start walking out. I’m surprised when Andy stops me and asks for my number. I look over at Carrie who waves goodbye to us. I give my number to Andy and walk out with Herb, leaving Carrie behind.

“Wow,” Herb says. “Did you see those green eyes?”

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The next morning I pick Herb up at his studio apartment in downtown Orlando, and we drive over to the free clinic. I’m still thinking about last night, about Andy. I think about the statistics regarding him liking me over Carrie. I decide that my chances are slim simply because that’s what I’m used to. But he did ask for my number, so I don’t know. Still, Herb and I left while Carrie was still there with Andy.

As soon as we walk into the clinic, I notice a swarm of women and children hanging around the reception area. I make my way through them and ask the receptionist where the free HIV screening is, and she tells me it’s on the fourth floor.

“It smells like ass in here,” Herb says in the elevator.

“You would know.”

“I’m so scared. Ten years of having anonymous sex almost every day of the week and this is what it comes down to.”

I turn to the woman riding the elevator with us. In a stroller, a baby, probably no more than six months, stares at us with wide eyes. “Sorry,” I mumble to her as the elevator stops and Herb and I leave.

“Don’t apologize if you don’t have to,” Herb says.

“I had to. She had a child with her.”

“They have to learn some day.”

Herb and I follow signs that say “HIV Screening,” snaking our way through the fluorescent corridors. We finally come to a desk and talk to a woman who gives us a blue slip of paper and instructs us to write our birthdates down.

“That’s how they’ll call you,” she tells us.

“Oh God,” Herb says. “They aren’t going to say the year, are they?”

“No,” she says. “Just the month and the day.”

“Thank God,” he says, and we walk to the door that leads to the waiting room.

“Wait,” I say, before we go in. “I’m sure everything’s going to be fine, but if it isn’t, then I want to let you know that I’m here to support you.”

“Stop making me nervous!” Herb screams and walks in. I follow him.

The waiting area is a small room outlined with ten chairs. We are the only ones in there, so we sit. I shiver as the metal on the chair freezes my flesh, and I pick up a newsletter designed to support people who are HIV positive.

“Don’t read that!” Herb says.

“You need to calm down. I think I should be informed if I have *the AIDS*.” I say the last part in a whisper.

“Don’t kid around.”

“What else am I going to do?” I open the newsletter up.

“But it’s making me nervous.”

“Okay. I’ll stop. I’m here to support you. Would you like me to read aloud some statistics or information regarding HIV?”

“No!”

“Do you think we’ll get AIDS from sitting in these chairs?”

“Stop being silly. You know we won’t.”

“Do you remember that?”

“Remember what?”

“In class, growing up, they used to educate us about HIV. They would always emphasize that no, you can’t get AIDS from a toilet seat. And there was always that one kid who still asked if he could get it from the bathroom. Everyone seems to always be so scared about toilet seats. I think I’m the only one not scared of them. I don’t even hover.”

“Hover?”

“Yeah, hover. It’s what girls do when they pee in public restrooms. They kind of hover over the toilet seat so that their asses don’t touch it. It’s silly, really. If the bathroom’s real disgusting I just put toilet paper down.”

“That’s what I do if I need to take a shit.”

“I can’t hover. I think it’s physically impossible for me to hover. What if I fall in? I think that would be worse than touching the toilet seat with my ass.”

I turn the page of the newsletter. It tells me that cases of HIV in the United States have decreased since the 1980s. Back when little children were frightened of toilet seats.

The door opens, and Herb jumps up. But they're not calling our birthdates yet. Instead, a boy who can't be older than twenty-one comes out and sits down. His right finger is bandaged from the HIV-screening prick.

Although this boy is a stranger, I find myself thinking more about his well being rather than Herb's and mine. I think this is because he's alone. If Herb or I test positive for HIV, at least we have each other, right here, right now. And I have Carrie, too, even if guys like her more, even if she's the pretty one, even if her chances of finding a soul mate seem to be better than mine. Carrie would definitely be here right now if she didn't have a class. But no one is here for this boy.

I want to tell the boy that he's doing the right thing, coming in and getting tested, even though no one is there for him. I want to tell him everything's going to be all right; he just needs to stay on top of things, have protected sex, you know, the usual. Things I say to my friends, to Herb. But I don't say anything. Instead, my mind turns to thoughts about last night. If I had HIV, would Andy still have asked for my number? I put the newsletter down and turn to Herb.

"Do you think Andy and Carrie like each other?" The stranger looks up at me and then looks back down, examining his pricked finger.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, they probably have a lot in common, given their math interests, and Carrie is super good looking, *and* we left them alone."

"I don't know."

“This always happens to me.”

“What?”

“Guys always like her more than me.”

“You can’t be angry. You don’t have a monopoly on guys.”

“Yeah, but she can have *anyone*. Andy was actually kind of interested in me. I never get to date guys like that.”

“Stop jumping to conclusions,” he tells me. “You don’t know what happened last night.”

The door opens, and a squat, Asian-looking man calls out “eleven twenty-six.” I get up and walk to the door. All the insecurities I have about Andy and Carrie concentrate into this single insecurity: the fact that I *could* have HIV, even though I’m ninety-nine point nine percent sure that I *don’t* have it. I look at Herb, and his legs are crossed, his right foot bobbing up and down. His eyes look at me and tell me everything will be all right.

The nurse takes me back to a small room and asks me a bunch of questions, most likely for statistical purposes:

How old are you? Thirty.

Have you ever been tested for HIV before? Yes.

Have you tested positive for an STD in your lifetime? No.

Have you ever had sex with a man? Yes.

Have you ever had sex with a woman? No.

How many partners have you had in the last year? Three.

How many partners have you had in your lifetime? Fifteen?

After the questions are over, the nurse puts on blue latex gloves, unwraps a variety of instruments, and tells me to hold out my right hand. I watch as he sticks the needle in, and a sharp pain that only lasts for a second hits the tip of my right finger. The nurse squeezes it, and a thick dot of blood comes out. He swabs it, wraps my finger in a band-aid, and tells me “twenty minutes.” I follow him back out to the waiting room.

“Twenty minutes,” I tell Herb.

“Oh my God. Ten years. *Ten* years.”

“Don’t worry for nothing.”

“I can’t help it.”

“I know. I hate to sound mean or whatever, but worrying about it isn’t going to make you not have HIV.”

The nurse opens the door and calls “seven three.” The young boy stands up and goes back with him.

“They need to hurry up already,” Herb says. “I can’t stand to wait.”

I lift up my right finger and show Herb my band-aid. “It’s my HIV boo boo,” I tell him.

The nurse opens the door again and calls “three twenty-two.” Herb jumps up and stares at me. I get up and give him a hug.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “Everything’ll be all right.”

I watch him walk through the door and breathe a sigh of relief. Herb’s nervous tics were making me anxious, so I relax for a while, reading some of the newsletter, picking up brochures about Herpes and HPV. One out of four women have Herpes. Fifty percent have HPV. Discouraging figures. The young boy still hasn’t come back from his results, and I start tapping

my feet. He could be finding out that he has HIV at this very second, and no one is there with him.

I shake my head, and for a moment, I imagine what my life would be like if I do test positive for HIV. Then I would have bigger issues to think about other than if Carrie and Andy like each other. But maybe having HIV wouldn't be too bad in the dating world, because I could join one of those HIV-positive dating websites, and then those people would have to like me over Carrie because wouldn't they rather date someone *with* HIV?

But I'm lying to myself. Having HIV wouldn't make dating easier. My thoughts reach back to the boy who still hasn't come back from his results.

Herb walks back into the waiting room with a band-aid on his right finger. He's still pretty nervous, so I tap my bandaged finger to his and say, "HIV Buddies!" but this doesn't cheer him up.

The nurse opens the door and calls me back to the little room. He informs me that I don't have HIV. A stream of relief spills over my limbs, and the whole process takes less than two minutes. I go back to the waiting room, let Herb know that I'm negative, and then it's his turn to get his results. He comes back in a rush and hugs me.

"I'm HIV free!" he tells me.

"Yay!"

We exit the waiting room and take the stairs back to ground level, and soon we're in my car, riding to grab some lunch.

"Did that kid come out while I was back getting my results?" I ask him.

"What kid?"

“You know, the only other person who was in the waiting room with us.”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“That’s probably bad, huh?”

“I don’t know.”

What I do know is that I’m free of HIV. I know Herb has to go back and get tested every three months to be safe, especially since he just had unprotected sex. But Herb has sex so much that I don’t believe there’ll ever be a time when he can say that he is one hundred percent certain that he doesn’t have HIV.

*

That night Herb and I go up to Blabber’s to celebrate our HIV-free states of being, and I call Carrie to see if she wants to join. She tells me that she’ll meet us there in a bit.

Andy hasn’t called me, but I’m not expecting him to. I’m sure that Andy likes Carrie more than me. I’m so sure of this that I find myself grinding my teeth as I get worked up over it. Herb tells me that I need to calm down, and I tell him that I’m not calmed up, because I don’t really know the opposite of “calm down,” and this seems to make me more agitated.

At the bar, I order a whiskey and coke, and Herb and I sit at one of the tables closest to the door and farthest from the speakers so that we can have a conversation without screaming. Two twenty-something girls sing “Love Shack” by the B52s. The taller, huskier one does a good job impersonating the guy part.

Carrie comes through the door. She waves and smiles before walking up to the bar and ordering her drink. I watch as most of the men, the regulars and the strangers, look her up and

down. I curse under my breath, and Herb sighs because he knows I'm noticing this, but we don't talk about it.

"Hi guys," Carrie says, her voice high and airy.

"We're HIV-free!" Herb says and holds up his bandaged finger. I took the band-aid off hours ago, but Herb wears it like a badge.

"Leah told me," Carrie says.

"I'm going to grab a book," Herb says and stands up to get a songbook and some slips of paper.

"Gonna sing tonight?" Carrie asks.

"Probably."

"Me too. We should do a duet."

"I don't know."

"Aww, come on. Maybe we can do 'Don't You Want Me Baby.'" Carrie says this because she knows I love singing the guy's part. But she never wants to sing it with me because the girl's part is too short. Carrie likes to maximize her karaoke singing time.

"I thought you hated doing that?"

"I'll do it if you want to do it."

"Why?"

I want to ask Carrie about last night, if something happened between her and Andy, but I'm too scared to hear what she'll say. Herb comes back to the table and sits down. He notices that I'm uncomfortable, but he doesn't say anything. He knows eventually that I'll confront Carrie about it.

“Because I don’t mind doing it,” she answers me.

I shrug and take a sip of my whiskey and coke. Easing into it, I casually ask, “So, what time did you end up leaving last night?”

“Right after you guys.”

“Did you talk to Andy anymore?”

“Not really,” she says. “Did he call you or anything?”

“No.” At this point, I should feel relieved, and I kind of do, at least about the whole Andy situation, but I still feel uneasy. I think about the day Herb and I had at the HIV clinic. I wonder about the boy in the clinic, alone and probably HIV positive.

The two girls finish singing “Love Shack.” I scribble down the song I want to sing on the slip of paper and get up to give it to the DJ. Instead of going back to the table, I use the bathroom, even though I don’t have to go. I just need to be alone for a few minutes, so I walk into a stall and sit on the toilet seat, with my pants still on. I wonder the statistical probability of Andy calling me after meeting my beautiful, math-passionate best friend. I question the point of getting tested for HIV if I feel like my love life has been on a losing streak for the past couple of years.

I flush the toilet, just in case anyone is in the bathroom with me, but no one’s there when I get out. Back at the table, I look at Carrie and Herb and smile. Really, a girl can’t be any luckier than in this moment right now, finding out she’s HIV free, even if a boy she met for five minutes never calls her, even if her friend is prettier and sexier and everything guys want, because really, she could have been at the HIV clinic alone today. I could have been that boy. A girl walks up to the stage and starts to sing Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire.”

I finish my drink while trying to obey my “don’ts”: don’t get jealous of my best friend over a boy, don’t drink beer before liquor, don’t go home with strangers. The whole bar sings along, and they hoot and holler when the chorus starts.

When it’s over, the DJ calls my name, and I smile at my fans, the other bar patrons who obey karaoke etiquette. The door to the bar opens as I climb up on the stage, and all I see are green eyes before I look over at Carrie and Herb, who are clapping the loudest, and I can still hear them as I take the microphone off its stand and start singing.

THE TOY

Squeaki Tiki is a green dog toy in the shape of an Easter Island head, and it makes a high-pitched squeaking noise that makes you want to ram a screwdriver into your temples. Of course I didn't realize this when I grabbed it from the clearance bin at PetSmart to give to my fifteen-month-old dog, Chloë.

"This is a cool toy," my friend Jaclyn said, picking it up. "I like the green color."

The toy seemed harmless enough. It was bound by plastic to a piece of cardboard, so when Jaclyn and I tested it out, we couldn't fully squeeze its middle, and the noise that bleated out wasn't bad at all—it was just a low beep. Now I know that the toy had to be marketed this way. If anyone ever heard what it would sound like when a dog gets a hold of Squeaki Tiki, no one would ever buy the thing, even on clearance for only \$5. And yet there were no indications, as Jaclyn and I walked out of the PetSmart, that Squeaki Tiki would cause such a headache. The day was typical for spring in Central Florida, the humidity clinging to our skins like the nicotine that stained our fingernails.

Naturally, Squeaki Tiki is Chloë's favorite toy. When she first encountered it, she crouched down in a play position and honked it with her nose. Then she opened her mouth and grabbed it, shaking her head, and squeaking it all over my apartment, in every room, every crevice, any place she could go. That's when the sound pierced my ears and made me cringe. It sounded like a dying mermaid. I texted Jaclyn, "Getting that green thing for Chloë was a big mistake."

The noise was so loud that I was nervous my neighbors would complain. After about ten

minutes of listening to the racket, I decided I needed a break, so I placed Squeaki Tiki in the closet on top of the dryer, closed the closet doors, and brought Chloë to my parents' house, hoping that she would forget about it.

Being away from the apartment and Squeaki Tiki for a few hours, though, did not help. When we first got home, I went immediately to my office to check my email. The remnants of Squeaki Tiki's unforgettable noises seemed to haunt me. I could swear that I heard the high *eee-eee-eee* every time I clicked a link or replied to an email.

After finishing on the computer, I got up, and the noise got louder until I reached the kitchen. Chloë had opened the doors to the washer and dryer, jumped on the dryer where Squeaki Tiki lay, and snatched it from its hiding place. She was positioned on her back in the kitchen, drool glistening off her reddish-brown beard, Squeaki Tiki's corner hanging from her lower lip. Her seventy-pound body was the terror of Easter Island.

I let her play with Squeaki Tiki the rest of the night. How could I take such joy away from her? She finally got tired and curled up next to me on the couch, her doggie dreams causing her large paws to twitch and tickle my legs.

I didn't hide Squeaki Tiki again. Instead, whenever she started playing with it, I would turn the TV up louder or just simply attempt to ignore it, though tuning out something akin to nails on a chalkboard is difficult. My parents came over one day, and Chloë immediately grabbed Squeaki Tiki, hoping that they would play with her. She shoved the toy into my parents' legs as they sat on the couch, her tail wagging, her feet ready to bound across the apartment the minute my mother or father reached out for the toy. The rotten noise belched from the Easter Island head.

“That’s horrible,” my father said. “Where did you get that thing?”

“I got it on clearance,” I said, smiling with pride. If anything, my parents were frugal and cheap. My mom spent hours on Sundays clipping out coupons from the newspaper. She made lists concerning what was on sale and where and if she had a coupon. She even highlighted grocery store circulars. Her days of glory were when she had a coupon for something that was buy one get one free. She felt as if she was beating the system.

My dad just shook his head and smiled. I knew he was thinking that he would be gone soon, and he would not have to deal with Squeaki Tiki again, so I had to remind him of his fate.

“Wait until I move in with you guys next month,” I said.

That got him. He sighed and scrunched up his face, his square glasses slightly crawling down his nose.

“Moving in with us?”

“I told you this before. Mom, you didn’t remind him like I told you to?”

My mother stayed quiet, sitting on the couch, pretending she could hear the episode of *How I Met Your Mother* through Squeaki Tiki’s screams of terror. She didn’t like telling my father anything, mostly because she was scared that he would yell at her and throw a fit, because that’s what he often does. We don’t know why this is; we just know that he’s a baby, and we equate this with being a man, for most of the men we know, including my brother, are stubborn and act like babies when they don’t get their ways.

I told my dad that my lease was up in a month, and because I had no job, I had to move back in with them. What else could I do? I was in my penultimate semester of getting my Master’s degree, and I had applied to more than thirty-five jobs over the span of three months. I

knew I didn't want to teach, because I had been teaching for a year, and I lacked the patience and ultimate drive to teach eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds who thought that writing was dumb and not needed for their business and engineering majors. I had no other options.

"I guess I need to clean out the spare room, then," my father said.

"I can't believe you don't remember this," I told him, though I could believe it. My dad is almost seventy years old, and his age had been showing for a while. Sometimes, while we were out somewhere, at the grocery store or a restaurant, he would suddenly stop and say, "What am I doing again?" This behavior scared my mother and me, but when we brought these issues up to my father, he only got angry and told us that *we* were the ones who were crazy.

Living with my parents would be challenging because of this and the obvious reason of me being almost thirty-one and living with my parents. When I told this to my mother a month ago, she said, "I read in the newspaper that many people in their thirties are moving back in with their parents. You know, because of the economy."

My mother, father, brother, and I were sitting on my parents' back porch overlooking their pool at the time. Four years older than me, my brother knew the embarrassment of having to move back in with our parents. He had just recently moved out of their house again after living with them for four months.

"Mom, I don't argue with that," I replied. "I'm just saying that it's not fun to have to move back in with your parents as you get older."

"You people are ridiculous," she said. "I would have lived with my parents for as long as I could have."

I doubted that statement, especially since my mother openly admits that her mother was

certifiably crazy, suffered from severe OCD, and treated my mother poorly. My mother told me that when she was younger and school was cancelled because of the New York City snow, her mother would still force her to sit outside until the afternoon, because my grandmother didn't want anything to interrupt her routine of waking up late, making coffee, and reading the newspaper.

My parents' house was less hostile than my grandmother's, yet I still was nervous to move back in with them. There was no winning with my parents. They were right simply because they were older, yet my mother's argument was not an argument at all. I had not said that they were horrible parents; in fact, I always maintained that they were wonderful. For one thing, they didn't require their children to pay rent when they moved back in, and they were supportive and understanding.

And yet my father sat on my living room couch, oblivious that any such conversation had ever taken place. The squeaks from Chloë's toy punctuated the silence. She didn't want to let go of it, not even for a second, though I could tell she was hoping that someone would try to grab it from her, giving her an excuse to run free around the apartment.

My parents soon left, and Chloë, Squeaki Tiki, and I were left alone to contemplate how we would ever survive moving in with my parents. Our rhythm and movements were like the sea—natural, swaying motions in tune with each other. I wasn't ready for a hurricane to come and chop things up.

A month later, I hijacked five of my friends, and they helped me clean out my apartment, load the boxes and furniture, and drive the two miles from one side of Oviedo, Florida, to the other. After we crammed the essentials from my two-bedroom apartment into the small room I

would be staying in at my parents', we stripped off our heavy, sweat-laden clothing and jumped into my parents' pool.

It was 97 degrees that June day, and it felt hotter with the humidity, so the crisp pool water soothed our sun-soaked skins and provided us with much-needed relief from the heat. My parents and I had bought hamburgers and hot dogs to grill for everyone, and my father paced from inside the house, yelling at my mother every couple of minutes about cooking the food.

"When does everyone want to eat, Maria?" my mom asked while I stood on the back patio, dripping wet with pool water.

"I don't know," I said. "Right now we're enjoying the pool."

"Well, your father's going crazy. He needs to know when everyone wants to eat."

"Just cook the food now, then, if it's that big of a deal."

My mom muttered something under her breath. My father was always neurotic about food. I knew that living with them again would remind me of this. He always had to know at least twenty-four hours in advance if I was going to eat dinner with them, because he had to know how much food to make. I urged them to just cook for themselves—that I would figure things out—but he didn't want to hear that. Therefore, if any of my friends wanted to make last-minute dinner plans, I never went, because I felt guilty that my parents were cooking food for me. Plus I knew my dad would have a fit.

My mom went to relay the message to my dad, and Chloë joined us near the pool as soon as she heard me squeeze Squeaki Tiki. She plowed into the water, jumping from the mildew-stained concrete into the middle of the pool, her mouth open, ready to retrieve her toy and do it all over again.

Although I had warned my friends about Squeaki Tiki's demon-like noises, they still started to complain. Jaclyn was the only friend there that had experienced Squeaki Tiki before, so she tried to diffuse the situation. She grabbed the green toy from Chloë's mouth and dunked it into the pool water.

"This should help," she said.

After Squeaki Tiki was full of water, Jaclyn threw it, and Chloë jumped in, her forelegs stretched out in front of her. She looked like a furry, brown Superman.

Out of the water, Chloë danced around the yard with Jaclyn's boyfriend, Nick, squeezing Squeaki Tiki in her mouth over and over again. The water had done its job. Squeaki Tiki was no longer a fingernail on a chalkboard; instead the sound that came from it was muffled and serene. Like a lullaby.

Of course this didn't last forever, and Chloë soon had Squeaki Tiki turned up full blast. By this time we sat on my parents' porch, sipping water and smoking cigarettes, the smoke from the grill wafting through our area, mixing with our smoke. My father cooked silently, turning the burgers and the hot dogs. My friends started to complain about the noise again, and then everyone screamed and gasped as Chloë ran out to the middle of the yard, dropped Squeaki Tiki, and went to the bathroom, getting a small amount of poop on Squeaki Tiki's big, green head.

"Oh please," I said over the groans and got up to fetch Squeaki Tiki. After briefly contemplating chasing my friends around the yard with it, I went inside and rinsed the toy off. I decided to hide Squeaki Tiki from Chloë for the rest of the day, since everyone seemed to be annoyed by it. I went into the bedroom that was now mine, grabbed a stool, and placed Squeaki Tiki on the top shelf of the closet, underneath a black scarf. I closed the doors and hoped that

Chloë would never know what happened.

“You people are babies,” I said to my friends once outside again. “What’s going to happen when you have your own children and have to wipe their asses?”

But my friends didn’t agree with me. They seemed to think that having a baby and cleaning up after it would be different than cleaning up after a pet. I couldn’t see their side. My dog was my whole life at that point. Having no job and having lost my long-term boyfriend six months prior, I knew that Chloë was the one constant in my world, one of the only things that would love me unconditionally. She gave me a reason to wake up every day. Shitting on her toys and playing too much with a seemingly evil toy were not things that I could ever hold against her. And if that meant cleaning up that shit and being exposed to annoying sounds, then I would just have to deal with it.

But later that day, after all my friends had gone home, and I sat on the couch with my mother, Chloë in between us, sprawled out on her back, her legs in the air, obviously worn out from the excitement of the day, I did not retrieve Squeaki Tiki. My muscles ached, and my skin felt like an alligator’s, worn from the sun.

In the middle of changing channels on the TV, my mother said, “I think she really thinks you’re her mother.”

Chloë’s eyes were closed, and her breathing was soft and steady.

“That’s because I am her mother,” I said.

“No. I mean, I think she really thinks you’re a dog. And her mother.”

“Oh, come on. She’s not *that* stupid.”

I bent down and kissed Chloë’s snout. Her eyes didn’t open, but her legs stretched out, a

confirmation that she had felt my touch. If Chloë really thought I was her mother, would that mean that she would eventually want to leave and become independent? Does it shame her to live with me, like I feel ashamed of living with my parents? These notions seemed absurd. Chloë was a dog, and dogs are loyal and dependent. Chloë had never shown that she was anything but enamored with me.

However, that night I slept with my bedroom door open so that when my parents woke up Chloë could properly greet them. She slept on the bed with me most of the night, her head on the pillow right next to me, just as she had done since she was a nine-week-old puppy. But at some point, when it was still dark, I woke up alone. The dim nightlight in the kitchen showed the outline of Chloë lying on the cool, tile floor, her head resting against my parents' bedroom door, turned away from my bedroom, from me.

The next morning I woke up around seven to feed Chloë. It was the first morning in my new living situation. My father stood in the kitchen, wrapped in a navy blue robe, pouring a cup of coffee. My mother was already busy at the table looking at the Sunday coupons. Chloë lay at her feet, as if protecting her.

"We already fed her," my dad said.

"Where?" I asked because her dish was in my room, on a special elevated feeding tray. She was almost as tall as the kitchen counters.

"In your room," he said.

"Oh. Well, thank you." Chloë sighed. I wondered if she would help my mom clip coupons.

I went back to bed, still tired from moving the day before, but it wasn't a restful sleep. I

wanted to feed Chloë. I wanted her sleeping with me. While living in my apartment, Chloë followed me everywhere. I got used to having her by my side. Now that we were living with my parents, I should have been happy that she had more people to be around. But I wasn't.

When I finally woke up, I told my parents that they didn't have to feed my dog. I needed some kind of semblance of independence. Yet as my first day back at home turned into my first week, they still fed her. I started running on an invisible clock, and I was able to wake up before they fed her. Proud of my newfound motherly instinct, I would grab her dish, fill it up with food, and listen to her crunch her food in my room in the dark.

But I still kept Squeaki Tiki hidden from her. I think I was hoping that keeping the toy from her would give me an advantage, just in case Chloë started showing signs of loving my parents more than me. I imagined coming home one day to find Chloë resting at my parents' feet while they watched TV. She wouldn't get up to greet me or say hello, and I would choke back tears as I ran to my room, grabbed Squeaki Tiki, and squeezed it, filling the entire house with the high-pitched melody. And as my parents would scream and plug their ears, Chloë would come running to me, her mouth open and ready to bond again with her mommy.

Of course, this was the worst-case scenario, and before this ever could happen, I had to sit through Chloë's agony of looking for Squeaki Tiki. She must've smelled its sweet latex, because she stared at my bedroom closet, sitting and just staring, waiting for a moment when I needed clothing so that she could get up and start panting, possibly believing that at any moment Squeaki Tiki would fall down from the sky and become hers again. She seemed to stare directly at the black scarf that covered Squeaki Tiki in the corner of the closet.

And then a week later, she stopped. I was getting dressed for an interview after taking a

shower. My parents were gone, my mother at work, my father down at the antique store where he sold items he found at garage sales and on eBay. Chloë lay on her side near the closet. She was blocking the entrance.

“Chloë, you gotta get up so I can get dressed.”

Not moving her body, Chloë followed my movement with her eyes only. I had to open the closet, and when I started to, she immediately stood up. I grabbed my white button-down dress shirt and realized that she wasn’t standing next to me, panting and staring. Instead, she stood staring at my closed bedroom door.

“You want to go leave?” I asked her, and she looked at me.

I opened the door. Her hips swayed with lazy movements as she shuffled out of my bedroom. I closed the door, since I was naked and needed to get dressed, locking her out of my room, and she didn’t seem to mind. She didn’t whimper at the door or scratch at it, wanting to get in. She was just alone in the hallway, making the most of her own time, not remembering about the green Easter Island head she once played with, the toy that used to make her pant and yearn. She had already moved on.

THE NAMES OF CHILDREN

By the time Theresa got to Vicky's beginning-of-the-summer party, the house was swollen with adults and their children. Vicky's annual party had been a part of Theresa's life for almost ten years, ever since she had been working with Vicky at Fulcrom as a graphic designer making vacation brochures. Vicky was lead designer. Theresa never thought that the beginning of summer in Orlando was ever anything to celebrate, what with the heat swarming months before the official beginning of the season, before Vicky's party. Summer was always just uncomfortable for Theresa, a time that she spent mostly indoors in the air conditioning. Besides, she had enough warm scenery to digest at Fulcrom, where white sands airbrushed among bluish green oceans were the norm.

Stepping into the foyer and breathing in the crowded air, Theresa weaved her way through the crowds, among the sweating adults and peals of children, and found Vicky and Kelly, another coworker, in the kitchen, the two looking like waxy mannequins among the stainless steel appliances and deep, teak cabinets. Vicky smiled as Theresa approached.

"When did you get here?" Vicky asked. She wore a blue velour jogging suit, though Theresa didn't understand how she could stand it. It had to be almost 100 degrees outside. The jogging suit was the kind college girls used to wear when they wanted to pretend that they exercised. But Vicky was no college girl; she was thirty-six, wife of Greg and mother of Gannon and Aislin.

"Just now," Theresa said. "I let myself in. It's so crowded in here."

Theresa never remembered Vicky's parties being so crowded. It's as if in a year all of

Vicky's friends got pregnant and, instead of giving birth to newborn, gave birth to kids already in elementary and middle school. But Theresa knew that wasn't possible.

"We were just talking about you," Kelly said. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a pony tail. At least she was sensible in a simple white tank top and jeans. Kelly had to wear jeans, though. She was born with her right leg one inch longer than her left, and Theresa knew she was worried that if she showed leg, people would notice.

"I don't blame you," Theresa said. It wasn't that Theresa didn't like Kelly and Vicky; in fact, Theresa didn't dislike *anyone*. But Kelly and Vicky were kind of boring, maybe too typical of women with kids. Those types of people who go on kid-friendly vacations and cruises, places with cartoon characters and balloons. Certainly not places Theresa would want to go, though at least Kelly and Vicky had families that they could take vacations with. Theresa felt like she didn't have anyone.

"We were saying," Kelly continued, "that you should meet Vicky's brother. That's all."

For the past couple of months, Vicky had been talking about setting up Theresa with her brother. He lived in Marietta, Georgia, and recently divorced his wife. Theresa was not truly interested. For one, she believed that Vicky's brother was too old for her. He was fifty-five; Theresa was only thirty-four.

"He's coming down to Orlando for the weekend to look at some houses," Vicky said. "I think he really wants to move here. You could be the thing that sways him, Theresa."

"I don't want to sway anyone. I want someone to sway me."

The women laughed, and Vicky excused herself. She had to make a phone call to order pizza, even though Vicky's husband was making plenty of hamburgers and hot dogs. Vicky had

told them that having kids meant providing a lot of options, which Theresa translated into spoiling their taste buds. Theresa feigned a smile and watched Vicky disappear into the crowd.

Pizza was the standard food for Theresa's friends as their kids started growing up and eating solid food. No one had time to cook meals anymore, no time to enjoy food, and most kids wanted pizza. They didn't want crackers with cream cheese and salmon, topped with lemon juice. They didn't crave marinated olives and artichoke hearts. Children never seemed to want interesting, palate-pleasing foods that used to be present at the parties Theresa attended in her mid-twenties. No, they wanted pizza, hot dogs, macaroni and cheese. Lasagna. Frozen lasagna.

Theresa hated these things. Most of all, though, Theresa hated pizza.

Yet she still would happily take pizza if that meant she could have a child and husband of her own.

"So where is he?" Theresa asked.

Kelly looked outside the sliding glass doors that went to the back porch patio and grill, where Brett, her husband, stood talking to Greg and two other men, whose names Theresa didn't know, while a bunch of kids, including Kelly's and Vicky's, played with water guns. "What? Oh, you mean Victor? He's not here yet. Still driving down, I guess."

"Victor?"

"Yeah, Vicky's brother."

"His name is *Vic-tor*?" Theresa slowed down her words so that Kelly could hear the absurdity.

"Yes, his name is Victor. Is that bad?"

"*Victor* and *Vicky*? Doesn't that seem weird to you?"

“Oh.” Kelly swatted her hands around, as if trying to shoo a fly. “I don’t know.”

“It’s like their parents hated them or something. Why would anyone do that? I mean, I guess I can see it, given what people name their children nowadays.”

Although Kelly spent most of her life living with her leg handicap, which resulted in a teetering whenever she walked, she had married young and early, and she had healthy-named kids: Kyle and Patricia. Like Kelly, most of the people at the party were married and had children, children who pranced around Vicky’s house, skipping their way through adults, never looking backward or forward. Children with names like Paras, Leland, and Maddock. Names that cut Theresa’s tongue.

“I wonder what I’d do if I had a brother named Terry,” Theresa said.

“Probably nothing.”

“What else about Victor?” Although Theresa didn’t think anything would ever happen between her and Vicky’s brother, she was intrigued. Being single and watching everyone around her pop kids out like advanced assembly lines made Theresa feel like she was *that* woman. A spinster. A hag.

“I don’t know,” Kelly said. “Vicky said he’s flying to San Jose on Monday to visit his son and his son’s wife. They’re having a baby.”

“He’s going to be a *grandfather*?”

“Yeah,” Kelly said, smiling in a crooked kind of way. “Well, he already is. They’re having their second baby.”

“Really.” Theresa didn’t understand if Kelly’s smile was innocent or guilty. “He’s twice a grandfather? Why would I be interested in someone so old?”

“He’s not that old.”

“You say that because you’re married to someone your own age.”

The children on the patio screamed as they turned towards the sliding glass doors and aimed their slender water guns at Kelly and Vicky. Kelly laughed and shook her head, but Theresa just stood there. Go ahead, she thought. Shoot me and put me out my misery. The children giggled and turned to the guys grilling, belching out the same screams as before. Theresa had to turn away from the children’s and parents’ shining, happy faces. Her insides twisted with the thoughts of being set up with a grandfather.

“I say that because for you fifty-five is not that old.”

“For me?” Theresa said. “What am I—deformed or something?”

Theresa immediately realized what she had said, and before turning away from Kelly, in fear of her reaction, Theresa’s eyes briefly rested on Kelly’s legs. But Kelly didn’t say anything, so Theresa turned back towards her. Kelly’s face looked normal, thin and straight, with a hint of a smile.

“Yes, it is,” Theresa said. “Fifty-five is too old. I’m still young. Apparently not according to men my age.”

“You should start dating men in their early twenties.”

“Ew,” Theresa said. “So I can help do their laundry and pay their bills?”

“Well, then I guess you take what you can get.”

Theresa didn’t want to settle for someone. If she was going to settle, she would have settled for Richard, the pre-law boyfriend she dated ten years ago. He was a little clumsy and nerdy, but he would have been able to support Theresa and their children, if they ever had any.

Unfortunately, Theresa couldn't stand that Richard didn't read or watch mainstream movies. She grew tired of his legal talk. Besides, Richard woke up at seven in the morning every day, no matter what, even on the weekends. What kind of person did that?

Settling for Richard would have been boring for Theresa. There was no passion in the relationship, just a regular, everyday existence. She wanted something exciting and extraordinary. And it didn't seem like she was going to get something like this any time soon, especially if she was being set up with a fifty-five year old.

"It just seems weird that I can't find anyone my own age," Theresa said. "And everyone tries to fix me up with older men, men who already have children and ex-wives, men who need Viagra and annual prostate exams."

"Don't be so dramatic. It could be worse."

"How?"

"You could be alone."

"I *am* alone."

"You know what I mean."

But Theresa didn't know what Kelly meant. She certainly felt alone every day after work, walking into a dark house, searching the Internet for websites with tips on how to cook for one. Maybe Kelly meant that Theresa wasn't alone because she had friends, but as supportive as Kelly and Vicky were (they always took time out to talk to Theresa if she called), they were still busy with their husbands and children. And so were all of Theresa's other friends. Theresa needed people that lived for her, and she needed to live for others. Kelly and Vicky weren't options.

Kelly peeked outside at Brett. He was a computer software engineer, and when he met Kelly in college, he spent most of his time playing Dungeons and Dragons and beating off to anime porn, his own personalized handicap, seeing how Brett was still a virgin in college. Kelly told Theresa this a long time ago. Back then, Theresa was sure that if anyone had told Brett that he would be married with children by the time he was twenty-six, Brett wouldn't have believed it. Yet here the two of them were, at peace with their handicaps, enjoying an afternoon filled with children.

Brett opened the grill and flipped over a couple of hamburgers while talking to Greg. A crowd of other adults, women and men, had gathered in the patio, sipping beers and wine, laughing and talking. From inside, these people looked like they had strings attached to their mouths and arms, as if this part of their lives had been staged. The children had calmed down and sat in wicker chairs around the plastic patio table, water guns still in their hands, no doubt waiting for an opportunity to strike while the adults weren't looking.

"Will you come have a cigarette with me?" Kelly asked.

"Sure." Theresa didn't want to go out on the patio with all the others, but she started walking towards the sliding glass doors anyway.

"No. Not out there. Out front."

Relieved, Theresa followed Kelly as she wobbled out of the kitchen and out the front door, Theresa's eyes fixed on the see-saw motion of Kelly's torso. Kelly must have had a difficult life, Theresa thought, dealing with kids who made fun of her walking funny. Theresa began to wonder if perhaps she had a handicap, too, although a different, social kind.

Once outside, Kelly climbed into her SUV and retrieved the pack of cigarettes. But

instead of smoking near the house, Kelly walked across the street, away from the din of the party.

Kelly handed Theresa a cigarette, and they smoked in silence, the bright green of the shrubbery and trees blinding Theresa. A few kids were running around in the front, hiding between the cars and tagging each other. But for the most part, the sounds of laughter, conversation, and screams were coming from the back of the house. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the summer.

Kelly turned to Theresa, her eyes like blue discs of oil.

“I’m pregnant.” The words tumbled from Kelly’s mouth and landed on the pavement.

“What?”

“I’m preg-nant.”

“Well, congratulations,” Theresa said and took a drag from her cigarette. “Maybe you should think about quitting smoking.”

Most of Theresa’s friends had children, grown children even, attending middle school, trying to fit in and looking for ways to stand out. Theresa wanted a family; her body pulsed with that need, harder each day. But she had never been close to marriage. She had not been in a real relationship in more than five years.

“I’m not going to keep it.”

“What?” Theresa studied Kelly’s slender body, looking for some kind of bump. But she saw nothing. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Why not? I thought you wanted more kids.”

“I thought I did, too, but not right now.” Kelly looked to Vicky’s house, a group of children pouring out of the door. They were on the hunt for the others, the ones hiding in between the cars. The children squealed with delight when they caught sight of the hiding kids and chased them around the yard, their feet stomping across the green grass.

“What does Brett say about this?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“So, you’re going to get an abortion?”

“Yep.”

Theresa had never been pregnant and never had an abortion. Even most of her friends could claim abortions, something they’d had in their early twenties when their lives were too new to change.

When Theresa’s friends went to parties, like Vicky’s, they sauntered in with families and introduced themselves in relation to their adulthood: “Hi, my name is Vicky, and this is my husband Greg, and these are our children, Gannon and Aislin.” All of the children’s names were strange, unique, thought up when their parents were young and believed that they were not like their own parents. Theresa’s friends managed to produce a whole generation of people with distinct, off-the-wall names. And when these children grow older, Theresa thought, they will name their kids simple, kind names, like Michael or Elizabeth. But Theresa didn’t have any of this; she had nothing to define her, nothing to say at parties. She didn’t even have an abortion story.

And now Kelly, someone a year younger than Theresa, someone married to a well-educated man and mother of two normal-named children, was pregnant and wanted an abortion.

“You could have the kid and give it to me,” Theresa quickly said.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well, who knows when my eggs’ll start drying up?”

“You’re still young.”

“Yet old enough to fall in love with someone who’s fifty-five?”

“It’s not *that* bad.”

“Okay, so pretend we do meet and we fall in love and all that stuff. Then we get married after one or two years. Have children after a couple of more. He’ll practically be sixty years old. Plus, won’t his semen be ancient? We’ll have retarded children. I just know it.”

“I’m not giving you my baby.” Kelly stared at Theresa, her lips thin and firm.

The children in the front yard were done playing tag and sat in the grass, the girls braiding green blades and the boys digging in the dirt. Theresa could smell the rawness of the soil from across the street. The stink buried itself deep into her nostrils.

“I know,” Theresa said.

“I need someone to drive me and pick me up from the abortion place.”

Theresa looked to the house. She couldn’t look at Kelly’s flat face anymore.

“Are you going to tell Brett?”

“Probably not.”

“Why?”

“He wouldn’t understand. He thinks it’s easy to pop out babies left and right.”

Theresa wished it was that easy. “Why would you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Marry someone who doesn’t understand.”

Kelly shrugged and took a deep drag from her cigarette. Theresa thought that Kelly must have settled. If she didn’t settle, then Brett would understand.

“I don’t know,” Kelly said.

The houses in Vicky’s neighborhood stared at the two women. They seemed empty and alone. Probably because of their occupants were at the party.

“I’ll drive you and everything,” Theresa said because she couldn’t be silent anymore. Frustration grew in her stomach knowing that she would be helping someone end something that she had wanted to begin for a long time.

“Thanks.”

Keeping a secret from Brett would bother Theresa the most, not because she was more of Brett’s friend than Kelly’s, but because secrets kept from insignificant others bothered her. Theresa was always open and honest with her past boyfriends, maybe even too much. She used to tell Richard when she was unhappy and why. She felt like that was the key to having a good relationship—working on it. But maybe she was wrong.

Theresa and Kelly went back to the house, and Kelly left Theresa in the kitchen again to check on her husband and children. Kelly’s secret burned inside Theresa. She kept looking down at her clothes and arms, as if they were dirty and smelly. She didn’t want anyone to notice that something was growing inside of her, an anxiety that she hadn’t felt since high school, when she made out with her friend’s boyfriend at a party.

Vicky walked up with the phone in her hand, making Theresa jump a little. “I just got off the phone with Victor,” Vicky said. “He’s running late, but he should be here in an hour or so.”

Theresa shrugged, not knowing what to say other than *Kelly's pregnant and getting an abortion*. But Vicky's eyes were staring right at Theresa, and she couldn't get away without saying anything.

"Did you ever wonder about your names?" Theresa asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"Your *names*. They're similar."

"We got teased a lot when we were younger by others in our family, aunts and uncles mostly," Vicky said. "But our parents really didn't find it strange. When we got to school, the kids made fun, but we were so used to it from our aunts and uncles that we didn't care."

Vicky walked away, and Theresa thought that that must be most people's problems: getting used to living. Theresa felt like she wasn't used to anything around her, and she spent most of her life questioning the indecipherable parts. Questions like, *Why does my trash smell funny? Why do I already need to buy a gallon of milk? What's that funny sound coming from the hood of my car? What haven't I found anyone I can build a family with?* All of these questions were significant to Theresa, and she felt like answering them would be the key to being happy.

Leaving the kitchen, Theresa roamed the crowds, saying hi to certain people or smiling to them. No one knew about the conversation that took place no more than ten minutes prior. Not even the baby Theresa held, whose name was Brogan, while his mother used the restroom. The baby could not have been more than six months old, and he was heavy and damp, yet she was comfortable with him in her arms. He slept, his head and body covered with a yellow blanket, even though the house was warm, almost the entire time Theresa held him. Theresa transported herself to a sunny beach, the waves crashing to the sound of Brogan breathing. Just like a scene

from the brochures she designed.

A few seconds before his mother scooped him back up, the baby opened his slate blue eyes and looked at Theresa, the stranger who held his life in her hands. Brogan's mother thanked Theresa and went back to talking to the other adults, the ones with children.

The awkwardness of being ignored caused Theresa to dawdle from room-to-room. She stood in front of Vicky's painting of a blindfolded preying mantis sitting on a tree limb, which hung above her sofa. No doubt a product of Greg's eclectic tastes in art. She breathed in the house's manufactured newness—its deep sinks and bright, airy rooms fit for growing children and satisfied adults. She slipped into Vicky and Greg's master bedroom, a large, open room with an attached bathroom that had a separate tub and shower. Theresa always wanted a separate tub and shower in the bathroom. She browsed through the different photos on top of Vicky's dresser. Some of them were just of Vicky and Greg, some just of the kids, and others were of the whole family. One picture was of Vicky, probably twenty years younger, her skin smooth and teeth white, a naïve teenager. Vicky's arm was around a taller man, older than her, not Greg. The photo was of Victor. He wasn't looking at the camera; instead, he looked to his right, at his sister, a tight-lipped smile drawn on his face. He was good looking, strong, clean-cut, his skin just as smooth and pink as his sister's.

Theresa thought that maybe she could like Victor. Of course he probably looked different than the picture, definitely older, but perhaps Theresa could just imagine him the way he was when the picture was taken, when he was around Theresa's age.

Theresa left Vicky's room, dodging children named Walsh and Flora, running into the pizza delivery man, who seemed closer to her age than Victor was, and finally finding herself in

the kitchen looking for Kelly. She would help Kelly through the abortion, and she would keep her secret, no matter how much it bothered her that Kelly was lying to Brett. No matter how much it bothered her that she did not have a child or husband of her own.

Maybe Victor could like her, too. She imagined meeting him, feeling his soft skin, tasting his sweat, laughing at his jokes. Having children. Perhaps one day the two of them would get married and move out to the suburbs where they would make play dates and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and order pizza. They would attend parties, like Vicky's, and when they both walked in and met the other parents and children, she would finally be able to say, "Hi, my name is Theresa, and this is my husband Victor, and these are our children, Nick and Nicole."

BALLET

Only a few parents look at Jerry when he walks in late and positions himself between the back wall of the auditorium and a large pole. He scans the crowd for the brunette glow of his ex-wife's hair, but he doesn't see her, which means she probably can't see him, and this is a good thing.

"Hallelujah" echoes throughout the room, not the Leonard Cohen version, but a faster cover of the song. Eight girls, around twelve years old, dance beneath the lights, their pink dresses so luminous against the dark that they leave smooth trails across the stage. Jerry's son twirls in the middle, the only ballerina dressed in blue tights.

Jerry doesn't know what to call a boy ballerina. He wonders what made his son like this, why his son couldn't be interested in sports or math or even band. Maybe it's his mother, Jerry thinks. After all, she has raised him. When they were married, his ex wife often took baths. Their whole house reeked of lavender and peppermint, the smells of bath powders and lotions and soaps. Perhaps this is why his boy has turned out liking leotards better than a football helmet.

Jerry can't look at his son for too long without turning away, as if looking too long at him will make Jerry blind. His son's hair is shaggy, dirty blonde, just like Jerry's. He examines the crowd, trying to see if any of the other parents are just as uncomfortable as him, but they all stare straight at the stage, unmoving.

The music rises, and his son dances on his tiptoes to the edge of the stage, in front of all the girls. The ballerinas bend and flex together, their limbs like connected trees, weaving in and out of each other, making it hard to tell them apart.

The children come to their final pose. His son's arms are stretched out to the crowd, a last embrace. They hold their poses as the audience claps and whistles. A baby cries. His son closes his eyes, and Jerry exhales, knowing that his son probably didn't see him hiding in the back, not that he would recognize him anyway.

SHOOTING CHICKENS

It's Friday, and I open the shooting range like I always do. I've been working here for nearly fifteen years. Been a manager for five. Tough job. Well, maybe not that tough. I know other people out there have it worse off than me, like those crab fishermen. But I'll be fifty-five in two months, and my bones feel like they're crumbling. Working on your feet'll do that to you.

Today ladies get to shoot for five dollars. It's the second busiest day of the week, Saturday being the first. So I have to make sure everything's in order before people start shuffling in at nine. Of course we really don't start picking up 'til noon, but some of the regulars come in during the mornings, eager to get shooting before starting their day.

The front room is small and white with glass cases full of gear: holsters, cases, knives, magazines. Behind the cases are shelves of bullets. Taking a place near the register, I grab some cleaner and start polishing off yesterday's fingerprints. I hear the rustling of keys outside the front door, and the owner Mick walks in, wearing his grey button-down shirt and jeans. He locks the door behind him, since we don't open for another hour. He always wears that grey shirt on Fridays.

"Good morning, Larry," Mick says, flopping his keys on the counter above the antique guns and ammunition we sell. "Any weekend plans?"

"Not really," I say. Mick doesn't know what I've planned out today. He doesn't know that by the end of the day, I'm going to quit. "What're you doing here so early?"

Mick doesn't seem to hear me. He never does. That's why I need to quit. Maybe start up my own shooting range. Hell, I practically run this one here. Meanwhile Mick spends most of his

time in the office, doing who knows what. Maybe I just want to be doing who knows what.

He gathers up the papers and pens stacked near the register. I'm about to ask again why he's here so early, messing up my routine, when he tells me he's got some things to take care of and disappears into the back room where his office is. I scratch my beard, which gets caught in the top buttons of my shirt, so I spend a few seconds untangling it.

I could go in there right now and quit, really screw him over. But I like Fridays, the prospect of the weekend, when the part-timers come into the range and work their hours. I'll quit before I leave for the day. I'm not giving no notice either. I've got thousands of dollars saved up, waiting to invest into my own work.

I'm alone until we open, no sign of Mick. I finish cleaning and grab some boxes from the back to restock some of the merchandise. The regulars start coming in around ten. They shuffle in, usually by themselves, their gun bags flapping like flags against their bodies. I greet them, make sure they sign in, check their guns, send them on their way, to the inside or outside range, and then I go back to restocking the bullets on the shelves.

Louise comes through the door around eleven. She's wearing a long-sleeved green t-shirt that's so tight it looks as if she has green skin. Her jeans are tight, too, and sit high on her waist. I imagine her coming from a wealthy family of gun owners, people who taught her how to handle a gun when she was good and young. Louise is the best shooter at the gun range, except for me and Mick. She can't be more than forty years old.

"Hey there," she says, her voice hoarse from years of smoking. "I'm thinkin' I might just splurge today."

Louise has been eyeing the new pink Smith & Wessons we got a month ago for breast

cancer awareness month. Every time she comes in she has to hold one, inspect its hammer and muzzle. But she still hasn't bought one of the guns.

"Which one you wanna look at today?" I ask, grabbing the keys from my belt loop.

"Hmm, let's see," she says, walking along the counter. "I haven't picked up this one in a while."

She points to a black and white semi-automatic pistol, and I unlock the glass case and hand it to her, my fingers grazing her palms. She takes the gun, flips it over, and feels the grooves on its grip. Her eyes dilate. We're so close that I can see the tiny pores on her face. She smells like watermelon. The way she's looking at the gun makes me wonder if she's thinking about shooting it or sleeping with it.

"I still don't know," she says. She never does.

"Well, you have your pick." I give her a wink. The truth is, I don't know why Mick decided to stock these things this year. We have four of them, and Louise is the only person who's ever been interested.

"You know," she says, her mouth scrunching up into a tight button. "I'm working at the bar tonight."

"Well, that's nice," I say. She hands me back the Smith & Wesson.

"It'd be nice to see a familiar face in there." Louise's head tilts, exposing a thick, blue vein in her neck. She doesn't know I'm going to leave this place today and not come back. I wonder what she'll think when she comes in next week. I can't stand her just standing there, her hands on her hips, waiting for me. So I turn around and continue to restock bullets. After about thirty seconds I hear the heavy click of her shoes and she's gone.

By noon we have ten people shooting in the inside range and five outside. I watch them on the small screen we have connected behind the counter. The shooters are all in black and white, and silent. But I can hear the faint sounds of gunshots coming through the range door.

Since hunting season is about to start, we have to keep stocked on deer targets. I take the Leatherman from my belt and slice open a box of newly shipped targets. The thick paper shows hunters where a deer's vital organs are, where to shoot for the kill. I've only been deer hunting a few times in my life, with my stepdad when I was younger, about nine or ten. We never shot no deer, though. Instead I grew up hunting small game with him, pheasants, wild boar, turkeys.

Before those hunting days, though, I used to practice shooting my BB gun out in our front yard. I shot anything there—cans, the fence, little blades of grass that stuck out higher than the others. Sometimes stray chickens from the neighboring farm would come into our yard. I shot them, too. I used my BB gun to hit those chickens square in the head. Their necks would flop around as the BB sent shards of their faces flying all over, dotting the others in blood. All the other chickens stood around, watching as one bled, convulsed, and eventually fell to the ground, twitching. Sure, they flapped around a bit from the sound of the gun, but mostly they went back to scratching the ground and squawking, not realizing that they were next to be shot.

My stepdad used to beat me with his belt for shooting those chickens. The neighbors would complain about their missing chickens all the time, but my stepdad never said nothing about me shooting to them.

I take the cellophane off the deer targets as Mick comes out from the back, carrying a clipboard with inventory on it.

“Hey,” he says to me and joins me behind the counter.

Mick grabs his keys and opens the part of the glass case where we keep our antique guns. He takes out a Colt 1851 Navy Revolver, the same type of gun Doc Holliday and Robert E. Lee used, and places it on the counter. The gun's in great condition, with only some slight peeling on the grip.

"Hey, you know," Mick says, flipping open the barrel. "Some of us were gonna get together and play poker tonight at my house. You in?"

"I dunno." But of course I know that even if I wasn't quitting today, I wouldn't come, just like I won't come to see Louise.

The truth is, I haven't really been out in six years, when my wife left to go live with her sister out in North Dakota. Fifteen years of marriage gone. We weren't in love, and I'm not sure if we ever were, but I didn't want to split up. Couples don't have to love each other to marry and like being around each other. My wife talked about splitting up for years before she finally bought a plane ticket, packed up her clothes, and left me with the trailer.

Mick grunts and continues inspecting the gun. I wonder what he's doing with it, if he's thinking about selling it to a friend or something. We haven't sold any of our antique guns in years. I think about telling Mick right then and there that I'm not coming back. I even clear my throat a little and walk over to him, but he's still looking at that damn gun, and before I can say anything he tells me to let him know if I change my mind. And then he walks away, to his office, carrying the gun with him. I sigh and go back to unwrapping and unpacking the deer targets.

After I'm done with that, I sign in two regulars, a father and son, for the outside range. The boy can't be more than twenty, and the father's gotta be my age. They sign their names, curly, fat signatures, like a woman's. Their writing is almost identical.

When they're back in the range, I eat my bologna sandwich, and Mick joins me behind the counter. The Colt is gone, and I wonder where it went, but I don't say nothing.

Mick hasn't worked the register in months, so I take advantage of him being behind the counter and slip back into the shooting ranges and watch the people all lined up, taking turns aiming and shooting. Because our air circulation is so good, there's only a hint of gunpowder in the air. Everyone looks focused and organized, and they're all pretty courteous, too. They nod their heads as I pass by them. My stepdad always said guns make people nicer. I guess he was right. No one who comes into this shooting range has a bad bone in their body.

I'm relieved to get outside into the cool air. Shotgun blasts fill my ears, even though I'm wearing earmuffs. The boy and his father are practicing with their new rifles. I watch as the boy's body recoils from the blasts and he reels his paper target in, anxious like he's making his first kill.

Louise is there, too, with her yellow glasses and bright orange earmuffs. The colors clash with her shirt, each of them wanting the attention more. I move so that I'm in her blind spot, although I know that's not a smart thing to do. But I want to watch without distracting her. She moves as if she's gliding on the rough concrete, adjusting her feet so that they're in a comfortable shooting position. She breathes slowly, regulating her body movements, and with one steady pull of the trigger her gun blasts, and she hits the paper deer smack dead in its heart.

I have guns to clean, so I turn toward the door to go back inside, but I'm stopped by the muffled sound of Louise's voice.

"Hey Larry," she says. "Come here."

My feet drag as I make my way over to Louise. She yanks the paper target from its holder

and shows it to me.

“Isn’t that a beauty?” She has to scream this since we’re both wearing the earmuffs. She points to the hole she made, and I stick my finger through the paper. I give her a thumbs-up.

She places a new deer target on the chain and reels it out. I wonder what it would be like if I did come see her at the bar tonight. I have no idea why a woman so young would be interested in me coming to see her.

After Louise replaces her target, she turns back at me. I see the gloom in her face, her drooping wrinkles, but I can’t help her. I am an electric fence, shutting her out. She’s holding her shotgun tight so that her shirt reveals her cleavage, and I take one look at her tan skin and turn around. She doesn’t try to stop me.

When I get back, Mick’s behind the counter talking with a middle-aged balding man who can’t be more than five-foot-four. He’s dressed in camouflage, a caricature of a man who comes to a gun range. I tower over the man, my beard coming down to the top of the man’s bald spot as I cross behind him. Mick’s eyes widen when he sees me. He’s annoyed, wishing I’d had been there for him, to talk to this imposter.

I join Mick behind the counter, grab a rifle that was rented today, remove the bolt, and anchor it to the stand. Mick glances over at me every now and then. Sometimes he sighs. I clean the rifle, careful not to scratch any part of it. The lubricant smells like cinnamon and Thanksgiving.

The bald man leaves, but Mick doesn’t say nothing. He just grabs his clipboard and walks back to his office. It’s almost time for Troy to come in and take over my shift. I’m going to have to walk into Mick’s office and tell him that I’m leaving, and the thought of this makes my throat

tingle. I've been working here for so long that I'm not sure if I can do it, but I know I need to get outta here and make something of my own, even if it'll be competing with this gun range. Maybe I'll move somewhere else, somewhere they need a range. Who knows.

Twelve rifles later, and Troy walks in, wearing a flannel and a hat with a bass on it.

"You comin' to poker?" This is the first thing he says to me, and I shrug, not wanting to say no for fear that he'll realize I'm quitting. But how could he know? No one does.

I've been working my ten hours, and my bones feel like they're staging a protest against me. I finish cleaning the thirteenth rifle and walk back to Mick's office. His door is open, but the light is off. The computer makes his face glow blue.

"You going home?" Mick asks without taking his eyes off the computer.

"Yep," I say.

Papers are all over his office, stacked high and crooked, threatening to fall at any moment. A calendar with young women dressed in skimpy camouflage and holding guns in erotic positions hangs on the wall. The darkness mutes all the colors in his office, and I wonder if this is how color blind people see the world.

"I was thinking that maybe it's time for me to leave."

Mick's mouse clicks.

"Remember—nine at my place. There'll be some high stakes going."

"I mean I'm quittin'."

The clicking stops. The weight of my bones makes my skin feel like it's creeping to the floor. Mick finally looks up and crosses his arms.

"What's wrong?" he says. I figure this is a typical reaction. Not that I've ever quit a job

like this before, but I guess it's only natural for a boss to think that there must be something wrong for someone to quit.

"I don't know," I say. "It's not really that there's anything's wrong."

But I know this isn't true. Mick's the problem, but not 'cause he's horrible or nothing. Just 'cause he's the boss, and I can't stand that I come in five days a week, dealing with all the lawyers and accountants who think they're cool for owning and shooting a gun. Meanwhile Mick sits in his office, doing who knows what. Staring at the computer screen, I guess.

"Maybe I just need to move on to something else," I say.

"Let's talk this over, Larry. You've been here for a long time. I can't imagine you just disappearin'."

"Sure. We can talk."

Mick looks back at his computer and clicks his mouse.

"Good," he says. "How 'bout you come to poker tonight? We can talk about it there."

Mick moves his mouse around, and I just stand there, among the silent walls.

"See you at nine," he says and waves his hand.

I start to walk out, but then I remember something. Mick's still looking at the computer.

"Hey, what'd you do with that Navy Colt?" I ask.

"The antique?" Mick's still staring at the computer. "I'm giving that to my dad. It's his seventieth birthday next week."

"Oh, that's great. It's good to know the thing finally found a good home."

I walk out of his office, the range, and into the early evening sun. My stepdad's been gone for twenty years. My mom fifteen. They died before knowing anything real about my life.

I drive home in silence. The range is only twenty minutes away from home. My trailer is settled back in the woods on a dirt road, a large stretch of land barely touched by anyone but myself.

I pull into my front yard. All the chickens are huddled to the side of my trailer, pecking at the ground and ruffling their feathers. Before I even unlock the door to my place, I unlock the shed and take out my BB gun. It's not the same one I used when I was younger. This one's newer, more advanced, more powerful. It actually looks like a real gun.

I hold the gun to my side as I approach the chickens. I have about five of them now. I point the gun at the chicken with its head down, its black eye never leaving my face. I pull the trigger. The other chickens scatter.

The BB hits the chicken right in the neck. It lets out a small scream, raises its feathers, and drops to the ground. It's still twitching as I walk over to it, a pool of blood trickling out from underneath its neck. Its legs curl up. They look like twigs among the yellow grass.

I pick up the chicken and bring it over to a picnic table next to the shed. The table is stained with black and red spots. It's so nice outside that once I'm done plucking and preparing this chicken, I think I'll eat on the front lawn. I'm tired, but not too tired, and for a brief minute I think about maybe going to poker. Then I think about Louise. She's probably dolling herself up by now, getting ready to take a shift at the bar. I imagine her glancing at the front door of the bar all night, wondering if I'll show up. And when she gets ready to leave for the night, she'll realize I'll never come, not because I don't like her or because I'm scared, but because I can't come. I have others things to do, like eating outside on a beautiful night like this, listening to the crickets.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

I have always used my writing as a way to figure out who I am. In elementary school, I begged my parents for a typewriter so that I could write like a “real” writer. From a garage sale, my mother bought an old blue clunker of a typewriter that barely worked, yet I still tried my hardest to type out stories, no matter how faded the ink was. Once the last key was punched and the typewriter died, I filled dozens of notebooks with what I thought were starts of novels—romantic fantasy novels (this due, in part, to Anne Rice). By writing these cheesy stories, I began to identify with womanhood. It wasn’t that I thought all women writers wrote romantic tales. Instead, writing those tales caused me to notice my hormones—those newfound chemicals that were causing me to develop grade-school crushes.

Those hormones were also responsible for me becoming depressed over not being asked to the sixth grade Valentine’s Day dance. My romantic tales morphed into angsty, bitchy poems about how love is a joke. I wrote poems about being misunderstood and a misfit—how I was destined to be alone for the rest of my life. And this time I discovered another part of myself. This part was cynical, vulgar, and bitter. Poetry brought this out in me. Fiction was just for wimps. Poetry was raw and real and intense. When I wrote a poem, it was like stealing bread to feed a child. Like smoking a Cuban cigar. Beautifully sweet and dangerous.

Angst-ridden poetry dominated my writing until I read J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* for my tenth grade English class (as if my beginnings as a writer weren’t cliché enough). Here was Holden Caulfield, a young boy, fed up with all the phonies in the world, not fitting in anywhere, not relating to anyone. I was hooked. Holden was *just* like me. *And* he wasn’t a character in a poem—he was in a novel. *The Catcher in the Rye* was just as raw and real as the poetry I had been writing.

After reading that novel, I began writing fiction again. Not the romance I had written in elementary and middle school; instead, I mimicked the style of J. D. Salinger and wrote about the absurdity of the mundane and the overwhelming human feelings of isolation, disconnection, and torment. By doing this, I explored my own tormented self as well as my own surroundings.

Sixteen years later, and I still consider *The Catcher in the Rye* to be a big inspiration for me. I try to read the novel at least once a year; every time I read it, I learn something new. But instead of marveling at how much Holden resembles me as a teenager, I notice the language, tone, and structure of the novel. I study its technicalities and movements. I took a graduate course while I was an undergraduate on *The Catcher in the Rye*, and I wrote an academic paper comparing Salinger's choices in that novel to the choices he made in "Slight Rebellion off Madison," a short story published before Salinger wrote *The Catcher in the Rye* that featured Holden as the protagonist. I moved from becoming devoted to the works of J. D. Salinger to becoming dedicated to the study of writing. I discovered writers like Arundhati Roy, Ron Currie Jr, and Junot Diaz—writers who echoed the talent I saw in Salinger, yet who were different than him in so many ways. These writers would help me on my way to writing *I Thought You Were Someone Else*. They gave me beautiful sentences, plots, and structure to examine and admire so that I could go on and try to do the same with my own collection.

Variety

When I began writing my thesis, my director pointed out that many of my fiction protagonists were like me: young women attempting to find a family to make their own while also attempting to be individuals. Although we recognize that this is somewhat normal (fictional characters almost always have little pieces of the writers' personalities in them), my characters

tend to be more autobiographical than most of my peers' characters. I write this way because I'm attempting to understand myself better while also trying to get the audience to understand me as well (perhaps so I do not feel like the outsider and misfit that I was in middle school). But I knew that if I wanted to challenge myself as a writer, I would have to become versatile and diverse. So I read other authors whose fiction presented an array of protagonists, like Pasha Malla and Stephen Graham Jones. Malla's collection focuses on an assortment of characters—from a young girl coming-of-age to fictional conversations between Jacques Costeau and Pablo Picasso. And while Jones's protagonists in *Bleed Into Me* are mostly young men, he shows diversity in the voices of those protagonists and the structure used to build those voices.

While reading these authors and more, I deliberately started to play around with character and eventually developed protagonists who were much different than myself. In "The King of Everything," a sixteen-year-old boy experiences the power and adrenaline rush of setting off a pipe bomb. I wrote this story because I wanted to explore why people, usually young boys, are attracted to destructive activities. To write this story, I had to put aside my own bias against people who enjoy explosives and anything dangerous and step into the mind of someone who likes those types of activities. Similarly, I write about an older man who works in a shooting range in "Shooting Chickens." I have a fear of guns, and writing this story made me confront this fear. In fact, I visited an indoor shooting range to get a visual of what one looked like. This experience scared me. On just the other side of the shop, through heavy metal doors, people had guns. And they were shooting them. But experiencing this and then writing the story helped me to write a character who was comfortable with guns. Other stories of mine that feature protagonists who are completely different from me include "A Joke That Isn't Funny" and

“Ballet.”

But although I would never fire a gun, set off a bottle rocket, be ashamed of an effeminate son, or think I’m in love with two women at once, there is a part of me that’s in these protagonists. And by exploring their faults, I explore my own. By attempting to understand violence and irrational behavior, I attempt to figure out what truly bothers me about these situations. What I found when I moved my characters beyond my own biography is that I do have a lot of experience with violence. This is something that I have known, but only recently re-discovered. While in middle school and high school, I got into a lot of physical fights with my peers. I also experimented heavily with drugs with a friend’s father. I have witnessed violence because of these drugs, including when my friend’s father slit his wrists in front of me and shot himself in the head one night after using heroin, but survived. That same man periodically sexually abused me before I ever entered high school. I have struggled with depression and self-mutilation to the point where I’ve been hospitalized three times. I have, it seems, lived through a lot.

These memories are disturbing. They are events that I struggle to write, and I have not found a way to do so yet. Therefore, I write about fiction and nonfiction characters who also have dealt with trauma and violence. I also discovered that it’s not the violence that I am completely scared of (thought that’s part of it); instead, death has always disturbed me. The idea of permanence is appealing; writing allows us to mark this world so that people remember us. In my stories, many of my protagonists are also searching for permanence, though perhaps their permanence is achieved through violent acts. Even in my nonfiction pieces I address this concern, specifically dealing with my father and the fear I have over him dying. “Snake

Hunting” and “The Man Who Punched a Lion” both deal with my father, and they contain elements of violence. These memoirs serve to preserve him in a way that I am not sure I can do without writing. In the end, the protagonists I write who are different from me are actually very similar, but it is only through writing about these characters that I have discovered how much I have in common with them.

Mixed Genres

Because biography was appearing in many of my fiction stories, I decided to actually explore autobiography by adding memoir to my thesis. The nonfiction pieces in *I Thought You Were Someone Else* are “Snake Hunting,” “The Man Who Punched a Lion,” “The Relationship Disappearing,” “Product of the Times,” and “The Toy.” The nonfiction serves to ground the whole collection by further exploring who I am and contrasting that self-perception against the fiction. In addition to writing nonfiction, I also read nonfiction authors like Dave Eggers, David Sedaris, Jeannette Walls, and Anne Roiphe.

Creating a multi-genre collection has shown me that fiction and nonfiction are actually more similar than they are different, just as I may be more similar to my “different” characters than I thought. Fiction explores our truths just as wholly as nonfiction does, whether that truth is based on biography or not. For example, Anna, the protagonist in “The Practical Use of the Engineering Section in the Stillwater Public Library,” has an attitude similar to my teenage-self, including my wish at that age to escape from Central Florida. The story explores my desire (and the overall human need) to experience an extraordinary life. My persona in “Product of the Times” feels the same way, though it is expressed through autobiography rather than fiction.

But I discovered inherent differences in the processes of writing fiction and nonfiction.

My process in writing fiction is to take a good first line and go with it. While writing fiction, I am able to twist characters and plot events throughout the entire process. I can change those characters' names, ages, and dialogue to fit. In nonfiction, however, the plots and events have already happened. It is my job as a writer to translate those events into my perception. This leaves a good deal of the "work" in writing nonfiction to the choices I make with language and structure. The toughest aspect of writing fiction for me is finding the story, but in nonfiction, the events are already there, allowing me to play more with the language. Similarly, revising nonfiction (at this point) is a more pleasant experience for me, because of the pre-determined events. The material is always with me, in my memories and perceptions, allowing me to focus on the technicalities of writing. And now that I've experienced focusing on language with nonfiction, I hope to translate that into my fiction as well.

This does not mean that I think writing nonfiction is easier than writing fiction; in fact, sometimes it can be harder to confront real events. And in writing nonfiction, I am openly exposing a persona of myself that may otherwise be hidden under a guise. Nonfiction workshops, too, tend to be more intense of an experience and can easily be felt as an attack rather than helpful criticism. Still, writing fiction and nonfiction both provide me with the thought-provoking exploration of my self that I have craved since I was a little girl writing fantasy novels.

Themes and Shapes

Some of the major themes in this collection are violence, permanence, and discovery. The title *I Thought You Were Someone Else* refers to those times when we see people that we think we know, approach them as if they are our friends, and then realize they are strangers. In my

collection, every protagonist (familiar and unfamiliar, fiction and nonfiction) goes through that realization in some way. I found inspiration for this in Dave Eggers, Carson McCullers, and Margaret Atwood, writers who usually have their protagonists discover something new about themselves, too.

This realization also mimics how I feel about this collection. After examining the stories here, I am awed by the amount of self-exploration and discovery I've done. I did not think that I was connected to violence or destruction. I also did not think I could write characters who were so unfamiliar to me and expose my personal vulnerabilities through nonfiction.

Another important theme in this collection is gender issues. Many of my stories explore masculinity in my attempt to understand male behavior. This theme is especially apparent in my nonfiction. Most of my memoirs explore the important men in my life. One day my mother asked me about this. She said, "Why don't you write about your mother? Don't you love your mother?" I told her that of course I loved her, but I wasn't sure why I didn't write about her. I am much closer to my mom than I am to my dad. I felt guilty for rarely including my mother in my art, but before I could truly feel bad about it, my professor pointed out that perhaps I do not write about her *because* I am close to her.

This makes perfect sense to me. My thesis is an exploration of the unknown, and my mother is definitely the known. I understand her actions, thoughts, and feelings, much more than I understand the erratic nature of my father. Similarly, it is hard for me to relate to young men who have never been in long-term relationships or who value art and accomplishment over family and friends. So I write about my father and my ex-boyfriend in an attempt to understand the "typical" masculine behaviors in which I don't partake.

These male behaviors are also apparent in my fiction pieces that deal with violence, homophobia, and sex. But I also explore “typical” female behaviors that I’m familiar with, like the need to have a family and find romance while also being successful. In “The Names of Children,” a woman in her thirties is forced to confront her anxieties about starting a family. She is a pot of water ready to boil as she wades her way through couples and their children. At the end of the story, she realizes that she may have to open up more and sacrifice some of her desires in order to reach her ultimate goal. This nervousness about growing older without any definite future that will lead to having a family is something I have started to experience more lately, and it’s something I struggle with daily. Although there are men who desire to have a family, they do not have an “expiration date.” Men can have children whenever they want, so the feeling of having that expiration is mostly a female one. The contrast in *I Thought You Were Someone Else* between the genders serves to provide a rounded overview of some of the struggles between male and female issues. These themes also appear in many of the works in my reading list, including the works of Bret Easton Ellis, Curtis Sittenfeld, and Anne Roiphe.

Simultaneously, the shape of *I Thought You Were Someone Else* also mimics its themes. I ordered the collection by age—the youngest protagonist begins the collection with the nonfiction essay “Snake Hunting.” Most of the action in that essay happens when I’m in elementary school, although the implications follow through to present-day. The collection proceeds in this way, each protagonist gaining years until we get to the end and meet fifty-four-year-old Larry in “Shooting Chickens.” This deliberate progression mimics the way people grow and change throughout the years and the way their understanding of themselves and human nature grow, too. Rather than separating the fiction from the nonfiction, making this collection two separate parts,

I intermingled the genres, because the point of the collection is not that it is a mixed-genre piece but that these stories work together to serve the purpose of uniting the familiar and unfamiliar.

The Future

I no longer write poetry on a regular basis as I did when I was younger (though I do not dismiss that perhaps one day I will). I have since learned that writing is raw and real in so many different ways other than form, content, and genre. Writing exposes who we are to the people we care about and to complete strangers. It's a personal and revealing art form, and it's something I hope to continue learning about for the rest of my life.

Many of the stories in this collection have been sent out to literary magazines where I hope to find them a home. If I find success in these journals, I may attempt to publish the entire collection. However, I want to focus my time after graduate school on writing a book-length memoir, focusing on the traumatizing events that happened during my childhood. It's been hard for me to introduce these events in such short pieces, which is what I tell myself when I think about why I haven't written about them before. But I also think that I am scared what I will find out about those events and myself once I start putting them on paper. I've also worried about what my parents will think when they read about them.

These are issues that I will have to confront and face, and writing this collection has prepped me for this journey. I did discover disturbing aspects of my personality, and I want to discover more. By exploring memoirs, short stories and novels that explore these same issues, I will be able to get an idea of how to present these events in a non-clichéd and original way (because it's easy for something like this to become just another drug-abuse memoir).

I ended writing this thesis with writing nonfiction, and I will continue writing nonfiction.

And even though I'm more interested in writing nonfiction at this point, I know that one day I may wake up and begin writing fiction again. Or perhaps I'll write more poetry. Or a movie script. A fantasy novel? Who knows? I know I don't, and that comforts me.

APPENDIX B: BOOK LIST

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